





# RELEASE THAT WITCH

BOOK 06

*Er Mu*

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

# **Release That Witch**

(放开那个女巫)

by

**Er Mu**

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# Synopsis

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Cheng Yan transmigrated only to end up in a medieval Europe like world, becoming Roland, a Royal Prince. But this world doesn't seem to be the same as his former world, despite some similarities. Witches are real and they actually can use magic?

Follow Roland's battle for the throne against his siblings. Will he be able to win, even though the king already declared him to be a hopeless case and with the worst starting situation? With his knowledge of modern technologies and the help of the witches, who are known as devils' servants and are hunted by the the Holy Church, he might have a fighting chance.

Now, let his journey begin.

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# Chapter 501: Body of Steel (Part II)

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Eden was a newly promoted knight in King's City who had no land and no inheritable title, placing him in the lowest rank among the nobles. Some great nobles even believed that knights were not part of the nobles and only held honorary titles. Thus, he was very excited to enforce Timothy's blockade order. Since he had sailing experience from his younger days, and the king preferred new recruits, he eventually became the captain of a hawk-headed ship.

He believed that he was a good judge of opportunity—this blockade was his chance to prove himself and be crowned as a real nobleman, since most of the noblemen were not willing to leave the comfort of their homes to fight on ships for months.

It was also easy for him to prove himself because both merchant ships and caravans stood no chance against him. If local lords sent knights to protect the caravans on land, the merchant ships would be left vulnerable. As long as he was not too greedy, he would be able to complete this mission to His Majesty Timothy's satisfaction.

"Of course, His Majesty's satisfaction depends on how much money and cargo I can seize." At this thought, he glanced coldly at the happy Rats on the boat across from him. They had intercepted a merchant ship from Redwater City yesterday, and although the captain insisted he was sailing to Fallen Dragon Ridge, they still seized all his cargo and killed most of the crew. The cargo mostly consisted of furs, wine, and a jar of gold royals. "And these idiots

dared to treat the seized cargo like their own spoils and divided it among themselves according to Black Street rules."

Eden chuckled coldly at this thought. "The Rats have no clue that their only purposes in this blockade are to openly plunder ships and to appease local lords. When the rebel king Roland is defeated, the Rat's heads will be sent to the lords who were affected by the blockade as an apology from the king. Then, the seized goods will definitely be added to the palace's vault.

But these Rats see this mission as a chance to strike rich and have no clue about their imminent deaths. How ironic."

"My lord, there's movement ahead!" shouted the sailor from the lookout position.

Eden peered out from the bow and saw a puff of black smoke in the distance, as if something was burning on the river. After a while, a gray smudge emerged and began to approach them. It was definitely a ship, but he could not see its sail.

"Isn't it traveling a little too fast for a ship?" asked his assistant after staring for a while.

Eden had also noticed this. Its speed was frighteningly fast, even for going downstream, and it had grown to the size of his palm from a gray speck in less than half an hour. He could also tell by its distance that it was much larger than regular merchant ships.

The other two hawk-headed ships had also spotted the target, and one of them began paddling quickly to reach this strange merchant ship before everyone else.

"My lord, should we approach as well?" asked Eden's assistant.

Eden pondered for a while and said, "Let's wait and observe first." He noticed that the hawk-headed ship behind him that was commanded by Baron Derrick was also holding back, while Rats' ship was already preparing to board the strange ship.

When he got a clear view of the approaching boat, Eden gasped in shock, and everyone on deck also exclaimed. The sailor on the mast shouted, "My God, my lord, what in the world is that?"

Unlike seaships with copper bottoms, the entire ship made of uniform glistening metal, including the strange iron tower on top of it. Its bow parted the river like a shuttle in fabric, and the foam it stirred up revealed how fast this steel vessel was going.

"Hum..." The boat gave off a deep whistle as it plowed forward and turned to crash straight into the first hawk-headed ship!

The hawk-headed ship was sailing sideways in order to board the approaching boat, a tactic that worked with slow merchant boats but left them vulnerable against this fast steel vessel—before it could turn around and escape, the vessel had already crashed into its defenseless side.



Its wood side split open with a loud crack, and the entire ship almost turned over into the river, as if it had been pushed by a giant hand. Fierce waves crashed onto the deck, and many men were flung straight into the water

"God!" Eden's assistant stared in fear. "It's heading straight towards us!"

"The enemies are attacking!" shouted the sailors. "My lord, the enemies are attacking!"

People began scrambling to set up bows and fill their flintlocks with ammunition.

Eden saw the flag of the tower and twin guns on top of the steel vessel, gulped and ordered, gritting his teeth, "Tell the rowers to start moving and take us close to shore!" He had never seen this flag before, but he guessed that such a terrifying thing could only be invented by the prince of the Western Region, who was rumored to deal with demons! Not only was it giant, but its speed was also faster than slim galleys. A mortal could never achieve this!

"Aren't we going to retreat?" asked his assistant, trembling.

"Retreat?" Eden yelled angrily. "How can we outrun a ship that is faster than us? Our only hope is to stay near the shore to prevent it from crashing into us and try to board it by circling behind! Damn it, go relay my orders!"

He pushed his panicking assistant aside and felt a chill as he saw the damaged hawk-headed ship. He could imagine how bad the situation inside the hull was. The steel vessel's bow was completely stuck inside its side, wrecking, if not completely splitting, the thin and flimsy hawk-headed ship. The unluckiest sailors were the rowers, who were either smashed to death by the steel bow, or worse, trapped in the hull and drowned.

Cries and curses erupted from the boat, and the fear they conveyed made Eden pity even the Rats on board—their circumstances were reversed, the hunter had become the prey.

As the current kept flowing and the steel vessel slowed down, the twisted hawk-headed ship fell off of the enemies' hull and turned over, spilling bloody river water from its hole. The second hawk-headed ship was desperately trying to turn around and run away, but the ominous whistle sounded again, and with a deafening rumble and long cloud of smoke, the steel vessel began advancing towards its next target.

## Chapter 502: Body of Steel (Part III)

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The second hawk-headed ship was still turning around, so its side was directly facing the steel vessel, making it even more vulnerable than the first. The Rats were all terrified by the incoming steel vessel, but a few of them still attempted to shoot the enemy with bolts. However, the bolts were as tiny as a needle compared to the giant boat and did not even make a dent.

Soon, the unstoppable steel vessel directly smashed into the center of the hawk-headed ship's side, instantly crushing a dozen of its paddles. Then, to Eden's disbelief, the river current and force of the impact caused the hawk-headed ship to flip sideways, which also lifted the bow of the enemy ship into the air.

The steel bow rose up and then crashed down heavily onto the hawk-headed ship's deck.

The hawk-headed ship cracked with a shrill sound, and the unharmed Rats jumped into the water to escape, while the others trailed blood all over the deck, screaming in pain from their injuries. Eden watched the steel vessel slowly lower into the thin hawk-headed ship, which fell apart under the weight with a series of cracking sounds. Its hull could not withstand the pressure and suddenly snapped in half, causing both ends to shoot upwards with a great splash.

The two halves did not immediately sink, but floated like corpses on the river with only half of the side port above water. On the other hand, the steel vessel did not have a single scratch on it and instead began to charge toward Eden's ship.

Eden heard the sailors around him gasp in fear. His hawk-headed ship was about to be the fifth one to be instantly snapped in half, and he was preparing to abandon the ship.

Luckily, he had given the right orders before!

His ship was completely pressed against the shore, and the enemy was turning to pursue the remaining Baron Derrick, which was trying to escape.

"Raise all your bows and torches!" Eden took a deep breath and roared, "I want all of these cowards hiding in this metal shell dead! I'll give you one gold royal for every enemy you kill! Do you hear me? One gold royal!"

If he survived and escaped back to King's City, he would definitely never be promoted, so his only chance of gaining Timothy's approval was to defeat the rebel king's ship. Even though this ship might have been produced by demons, the crew on it was still human and defeatable!

The sailors seemed to regain some of their confidence after dodging the last round of the enemy's attacks. These men all dealt with murder in their previous jobs, so they were used to seeing blood and gore—as long as they were not going to be completely slaughtered, they were still willing to earn a gold royal or two.

When the hawk-headed ship was completely safe from being hit, it left the shore and sailed parallel to the steel vessel, slowly

inching toward its course, until the two ships were sailing alongside each other.

Before the steel vessel passed them and when the two ships were only meters apart, the sailors raised their various weapons. They would first fire at the passing ship and then board it to attack the crew, which was the common tactic used against merchant ships. However, there was not a single man on deck, only a dark tube encased in metal and containing a row of small holes, pointing directly at the sailors.

Before Eden could figure out what this thing was, the tube began to spit tongues of flames!

Bursts of blood began to appear among the row of armed men, and wooden fragments and gore flew everywhere. The sailors were cut down like rows of grass, while the surviving ones immediately began to search for cover. However, neither barrels nor masts were a match against the metal tube, which shattered the barrels and snapped the masts with a loud crack. After the sails fell into the water, the hawk-headed ship began to slow down.

Eden did not get the victory he had dreamed of. He realized that the tube was some sort of flintlock, but it was much faster and shot out streams of bullets with a hissing sound. However, he could not understand how the rebel king managed to drastically improve such a slow and inaccurate weapon... perhaps this could only be explained as the power of the devil.

Soon, he was struck by a shower of bullets.

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This was Rodney's first time witnessing such a battle. The Roland barreled its solid bow straight through the enemy ships as if they were dry weeds, leaving them completely helpless. He waited by the cannons for an order to open fire, but that order never came.

When the fourth enemy ship was left floating in pieces in the river, the battle was officially over.

The enemies' screams and groans filled the air, while the survivors gave up their faith, swam to shore, and escaped without hesitation into the forest. His Highness did not order the crew to chase after these deserters and left them to run off on their own. There were also some badly injured men who were holding onto their last breaths and lying against the broken ships, but no one tried to save them from their inevitable deaths.

"What a shame." Jop put the unused shells back in their cases. "I thought we'd be able to show off the true power of cannons to those fellows in the Gun Battalion."

"Yes," agreed Nelson disappointedly. "Compared to the ammunition we used for the heavy machine guns, a round of cannon shells uses about the same amount and is much more effective."

"That's enough. Miss Anna personally made these, so they're much more valuable than machine gun bullets, which are

produced by the hundred every day," said Van'er with a frown. "You'll get your chance when we attack the city, so be sure to aim well and save face for the Artillery Battalion! I hand-picked all of you..."

"To join your elite team, commander, you've told us this many times," said Nelson, splaying his hands. "Don't worry, it won't take more than three shells to blow open the gate in King's City." He nudged Rodney. "Hey, say something."

"I want a battleship like this one..."

"What?" The other four men were shocked.

"I hope to own a shallow water gunboat like this one someday." He repeated, his eyes glittering with excitement. "I'm going to call it the Rodney!"

"Wait, don't you think your elder brother deserves this honor first? The second boat should be called the Nelson."

"No way... I'm not giving you that right."

"Save it, you two. The second boat will definitely be called the Van'er. Don't forget that I brought all of you into the elite mortar team."

"Here we go again." Cat's Claw sighed.

"Could it be called the Cat's Claw or the Jop?" Jop mumbled quietly.

"No," responded the three men in unison.

After the concrete boats caught up to the flagship, the expedition fleet resumed its journey. Two days later, King's City's gray city wall emerged into sight.



# Chapter 503: The Battle of King's City (Part 1)

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"Your Highness, there's a platoon guarding the pier area," Lightning, who was responsible for monitoring the enemy's situation, reported. "There are about 100 of them, and judging from their uniforms, they seem to be militia."

"Only 100?" Roland was slightly surprised. It was predictable that Timothy would deploy troops to the pier of the outlying district—the massive fleet was certain to be noticed when it passed through Redwater City and Silver City. Though steamships were much faster than sailing ships, and could in five days cover a distance which the latter would require seven days for, they were still not as fast as messengers who continuously changed horses and traveled round the clock. Not to mention pigeons—if the new king's spies used pigeons to deliver their report, Timothy would have received the news two or three days in advance.

But it was unexpected that Timothy would deploy only 100 men to defend the pier. Roland had imagined that the first battle would take place in its vicinity. He anticipated that crossbowmen, musketeers, and even mangonels would be stationed along both banks of the river in order to prevent his troops from landing on shore successfully. This was why he wanted to build inland river gunboats in time for the spring offensive. The efficiency of transportation by water was much higher than that of by land, but its disadvantage was that the troops had to alight at a dock and thus could be easily ambushed. If his army had the capability to attack across the shore, it would be able to handle any ambush easily and create a secure landing point.

It seemed as though Timothy had already given up on the "massive advantage" he would have while Roland's troops were landing. From Roland's perspective, although this was the right decision, it was unjustifiable—it was impossible that Timothy knew about the range and power of his 152 mm naval artillery.

As Roland thought about this, he beckoned Sylvie over. "Are the militiamen carrying any Berserk Pills?"

Sylvie summoned her Eye of Magic and took some time to observe the scene. "I don't see anything that looks like a pill. Some of them don't even have any weapons on them. But... there's something strange about the ground."

"The ground?"

"They have buried a few things in the ground... there're also some on the pier." Sylvie strained her brows to observe even more carefully. "Crocks and barrels... they're filled with dark gray powder."

"Gunpowder?" Nightingale exclaimed uncontrollably.

"Well, that makes sense," Roland said, acting as calm as he could. "The militia is just a bait to draw our attention. By presenting us with a false opportunity to scramble ashore and capture the pier, Timothy will then ignite the gunpowder and blow all of us up."

In his heart, he was not as calm as he appeared. This strategy was

similar to the landmine warfare of the past and was indeed a good plan. Though he saw through it early, his troops would still need to land on shore—having made the choice to travel by water, the pier was a necessary crossing, and it seemed that Timothy was aware of this inevitability. He probably hoped to catch Roland by surprise by setting up an ambush instead of fighting straight up. If Sylvie was not around, there was a chance that Roland would have walked right into the trap.

The solution to this was fairly accomplishable. As Timothy did not have wireless methods to ignite the gunpowder, he would have to deploy people near the barrels to do the ignition. All that Roland had to do was to eliminate these people. In any case, it was important to preserve the pier, or else he would not be able to transport his cannons and ammunition on shore.

Through Sylvie's careful observation, Roland was able to pinpoint two places where the ignition was likely to be carried out. One was situated in a shack on the edge of the pier, as evident from a long iron pipe that connected it to the nearest barrel. The other was situated in the pier's warehouse. The two places had a similar feature - a shifting black hole formed by a God's Stone of Retaliation.

After some discussion with Iron Axe, Roland quickly decided the battle plan.

First, Nightingale would sneak into the warehouse, silently dispose of the ignition crew, and guard the gate against substitutes running in and igniting the gunpowder. Then, Roland would use the naval artillery to destroy the shack. There was no problem

even if it caused the gunpowder to ignite—so long as the pier remained in good condition.

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Leaning against a battlement on the west side of King's City, the Steelheart Knight, Weimar, raised his telescope and observed the movement on the river.

The long and thin canal was like a strip of glittering gold ribbon which cut through the brown and white plains, of which much of the accumulated snow had already melted to reveal a vivid green that came from the sprouting of grass. This was proof that earthly things were coming back to life. Such a view was always pleasurable regardless of the occasion. The only things that did not fit the scene were the billows of black smoke that drifted through the air directly above the canal.

It's the fleet of the rebel king, Roland Wimbledon.

I never thought that he'd really dare to attack King's City.

Although Weimar felt that it was laughable, he also developed a hint of admiration for Roland.

Ever since this capital city was built more than 200 years ago, it had never been attacked. Once an enemy saw the towering and magnificent bluestone walls of the city, the courage to attack would naturally fizzle away. Not everyone possessed the audacity

to fight when it was clear that the enemy held an absolute advantage.

At least, Timothy Wimbledon surely doesn't possess this courage.

While the person who does possess it is our enemy, unfortunately.

The knight was committed to his honor. As the Guardian Knight of King's City, he was entrusted with the responsibility of defending it, and would have to fulfil his duty until the very end.

"Sir, the rebel king's fleet is here!" A squire ran up to the battlements and yelled.

"Hush, I saw it long ago." Weimar placed his telescope down and spat out some saliva. "Convey my order that the 1st and 2nd Cavalry shall mount their horses and await my command behind the city gate, while the mercenaries shall follow closely behind the cavalries. Tell them not to piss their pants when the gunpowder explodes. The oil boilers will also be set on fire, even though I doubt that the enemy will be able to touch this side of the city wall."

The knights nearby burst into laughter at once.

According to the plan, after allowing the rebel king's platoon to occupy the pier, flags would be raised along the city wall. At this time, the snow powder buried near the pier would be ignited,

which would be certain to disarray and damage the enemy substantially. Then, the city gates would be opened for the cavalries to launch their attack, ultimately delivering a comfortable victory.

"Those country bumpkins from the Western Region probably believe that King's City is comparable to their grandest city, Longsong Stronghold. Just climb a ladder and the city can be seized." The Ironfeather Knight, Scar, chimed in. "I think that you can save the firewood and bring them home to burn."

"Just for precaution." "What a fool," Weimar silently thought, "even if things like the boiling oil or the rolling stones aren't effective in battle, they must still be displayed for His Highness' sake. Trying to be cheap just because the enemy's too weak to break in—with this kind of mentality, he'll surely be kicked out of the city's knightage by Timothy sooner or later."

He raised up the telescope once again, only to see the front most sailless ship detach from the rest of the fleet and head towards the pier on its own. The top of the ship billowed black smoke which could be seen from miles away, while there were no paddles on either side of the ship. It was unclear to him how the ship operated. But these were unimportant details. No matter how weird a ship was, it could not come on shore and fight.

The sailless ship gradually reduced its speed and unhurriedly docked at the pier on the opposite shore.

"What're they trying to do?" Scar raised his eyebrows. "Do they intend to alight on the opposite shore? Don't tell me that 100

militiamen scare the rebel king?"

Weimar also felt surprised. Usually, when an enemy saw that the pier's defense was paper-thin, it would try to capture the pier quickly. He opened his mouth to say something, but just then, a blaze of fire lit up in front of the strange-looking ship.

The orange-red flames seemed to create a new dawn.

## Chapter 504: The Battle of King's City (Part 2)

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A few seconds after the flames blazed, Weimar heard a dull thunderous sound.

It came from a far distance away. Although its tone was not high, it was nevertheless powerful. He saw that right next to the shack, a pillar of earth rose up in tune with the sound.

"What just happened?"

"Was the snow powder ignited?"

"Doesn't seem like it. It seems to have been done by that ship."

"What a joke. It's about a mile away."

The knights were busy discussing among themselves. Weimar frowned and wondered. "Could it be that... the enemy has noticed something strange about the ground?"

According to the intelligence gathered from various channels, the rebel king possessed extremely powerful snow powder weapons which were superior in both range and accuracy to anything the King's City blacksmiths were able to knock up. Hence, from the beginning, Timothy had decided not to engage in direct combat, but instead to use the snow powder barrels as ambush so that



Roland's weapons would be rendered useless. The things that released fire at the front of the ship were likely to be enlarged versions of the weapons. They were able to load more snow powder and shoot a more powerful projectile. The only issue was that they were much more difficult to manufacture than handheld weapons. Already, despite Timothy putting all of the city's blacksmiths to work throughout the winter, the devices they were able to create were not even as good as trebuchets.

After a short while, the flames appeared once again, followed by the same thunderous sound. This time, the earth pillar attached itself firmly to the shack and flew up, causing mud to splotch all over the roof of the shack.

Weimar's guess was proven correct. Clearly, the enemy had conceived a plan to get to the shack, which meant that they knew about the snow powder hidden near to the pier! As such, Timothy's ambush tactic failed. Weimar quietly thought to himself, "Perhaps they do have a chance to touch the city wall."

After this battle, it would become evident whether the snow powder weapons were more powerful or the walls of King's City were sturdier.

Just then, a booming sound was heard from the battlements...

It was louder and more sonorous than anything the knights had ever heard, as though thunder clapped right beside their ears.

A small hill began to arch upward in the space in front of the

pier. Dirt and stones were hurled into the air before smoke and fog burst out of the dirt, forming a visible cloud-shaped gaseous mass. Violent quakes swept through the land, and in an instant, the top of the city wall began to sway terribly. Weimar instinctively crouched his body, but Scar suffered a foot sprain and fell to the ground beside him.

After reaching its maximum height, the flying soil began to fall like torrential rain. Yet, it did not make any noise when it hit the ground. Weimar's ears buzzed for a while, and it took some time for him to regain his senses after the tremors.

Damn it, that fool didn't wait for the flag signal to ignite the snow powder!

The ground, which was originally flat, now looked as if it had been chewed upon. Bumps and hollows were everywhere, while hot and white smoke emitted from the loose black mud, filling the air with the smell of gunpowder.

Weimar leaned one side of his head out from behind the battlement. He saw that in the distance, the fleet began to move once again. The ships formed a straight line as they headed toward the pier. The decoy militiamen were either paralyzed on the pier, or had dropped their weapons and fled in various directions.

"Who was responsible for the ignition?" Scar, who was angry from embarrassment, held a guard by the collar and interrogated. "I'll wring his head off!"

"It was a person arranged by His Highness." Weimar snapped. "Watch the enemy carefully. They're coming on shore any time now. Prepare to raise the blue flag."

"I hope the fella hiding in the warehouse will be able to complete his mission," he thought.

However, there was no movement in the pier area at all, and the enemy's crews were able to land the shore easily.

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Allen Alba was busy maintaining his rapier when the thunderous booms sounded and shook the earth. The violent explosions and tremors almost caused him to drop the rapier out of shock.

Though he knew in advance that this would happen, he did not expect the sound of exploding snow powder to be so loud and terrifying.

After all, it took place at least two miles away from where he was. "How does it feel like on the scene?" He wondered.

Using his hands, he soothed his mount which had turned restless. Then, he kept his rapier in its sheath and beckoned toward the cavalries behind him. "When the gate opens, you'll follow my charge. Don't hold back your horses' energy. They have no way to retreat!"

From the uncertain response he received, it was apparent that few among the horsemen had recovered from the thunderous shock waves.

Allen cried out loudly, "This is a trap set by His Highness. The wrath of thunder shall punish our enemies, not us! Gather yourselves; our enemies have nowhere to run!"

"Yes..." The response this time was slightly more in unison.

The mercenaries waiting behind the cavalries were still in a dazed state. Allen shook his head disdainfully. He had never taken these people seriously—they were merely the back line responsible for cleaning up the mess on the battlefield.

After quite a long while, the city gate was still yet to be opened.

"What's going on?" He glanced toward the top of the city walls with suspicion. The Steelheart Knight had not issued any new orders—however, as the charge could begin at any time, Allen could not leave his position and inquire about the situation. Time went by slowly. All of a sudden, he heard a dull and muffled sound which seemed to originate from very far away. If he did not remember wrongly, it was the enemy's signal to attack.

Did something go wrong with the plan? Didn't the snow powder trap cause the enemy to disperse and flee?

Whew...

As Allen's anxiety reached its tipping point, he suddenly heard a strange wind sound. Before he could gather his thoughts, the bricks beside the city gate split open at once.

Ka-cha!

Stones and slags flew in all directions. He felt numbness around his waist and fell off his horse stiffly. The startled horse even stepped on his thigh as it attempted to flee.

The extreme pain caused Allen to howl. "Ahh, my leg...!"

"Captain!"

"My lord Allen!"

Two squires quickly gathered around him.

"Control the platoon, and stop them from running around!"

Allen shouted while trying to bear with the stinging pain.

The formation of the cavalries was in complete disarray. Nobody knew exactly what was going on, and many rode on their horses as they tried to avoid the objects flying through the air. Though the squires issued instructions as loud as they could, it was difficult for them to take charge of the situation while this was going on.

Allen tried several times to stand up but failed each time. Turning his head, he was horrified to see that his thigh had twisted into an irregular shape, and was badly ruptured and lacerated. His armor plate had deformed and tilted to one side, while a dislocated white bone had torn through his flesh and trouser to expose a small section with bits of tissue hanging on it.

Allen's heart began to turn cold. He knew that his career as a knight was effectively over.

Just then, he heard the strange wind sound again.

This time, the city gate was where the change occurred.

Allen saw the two guards standing at the city gate instantly become enveloped by large masses of debris, before flying pieces of wood and stone swept through them like a swarm of bees. When the debris dissipated, Allen was astounded to see that the upper bodies of the two guards seemed as if they had been sliced with sharp knives. Fresh blood mixed together with their red-green innards and trickled on to the floor. Behind them were another five or six horsemen heaped on the floor unconscious. What had appeared to be harmless pieces of wood had turned into deadly weapons and sliced through the bodies like knives. Even the pieces of stone, which were only the size of a thumb, were able to penetrate the guards' helmets and armors!

Furthermore, a gap of the size of a basin had appeared on the city gate, which was nearly two feet thick. All these had happened

while the enemy was still more than three miles away!

"Demons, the enemies are demons!"

Out of nowhere, someone shouted something, and the scene, which was already dreadful and chaotic enough, became even more disastrous.

The cavalries, which had been prepared for the assault, hastily turned their mounts backward and galloped away. As they caught up with the fleeing mercenaries, they trampled over bodies and created even more serious disorder. In the twinkling of an eye, the situation near the west city wall had become completely out of control.

Allen had no more energy left to support his body. He collapsed on the floor and looked towards the sky helplessly. The cries of panic from the crowd and the continuous sounds of things breaking apart seemed to become more and more distant, and his surroundings gradually became quieter.

He had one last thought in his mind.

It's so cold...

# Chapter 505: The Battle of King's City (Part 3)

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Meanwhile, Lightning, Wendy, Maggie and Hummingbird were executing the final attack before the main offensive.

Because the main artillery of the battleships only fired solid bullets, they were largely ineffective against the personnel and defense facilities on the city wall. Hence, the witches aimed to destroy the first line of defense so as to puncture the enemy's effective strength and open up a safe channel for the general offensive.

This was also the first time that the hydrogen balloon was used in battle.

Unlike the thousand-mile raid five months back, the balloon lifted off from just beside the canal this time, allowing almost everyone to witness the ascent of this colossal object. Under Roland's plan, the hydrogen balloon, which could move anywhere without hindrance, was advanced enough to be used as a short-distance bomber during this era. With the fleet behind it providing logistical support, this earmarked the beginning of the generation of aircraft carrier combat.

Standing on the pier, the soldiers of the First Army burst into fervent applause. They knew well that no enemy was able to resist an aerial attack and therefore their wise and benevolent lord was certain to win this war.



Quickly, the hydrogen balloon drifted to the sky directly above King's City. From its perspective, the majestic capital was only about the size of a palm. Lightning pulled down her windshield goggles and gestured to Wendy to release the bomb. The latter nodded back at her and pulled the mechanism.

Shortly, a bomb dislodged from its frame and fell towards the ground.

Another difference of this aerial attack from previous times was that Anna was not onboard but was replaced by Hummingbird. Under the effect of the latter's sustained magic power, the four carried bombs weighed only a fifth of their usual weight as long as they did not detach from each other. This type of enchantment was a new method discovered by Hummingbird while she was cultivating her mastery of magic power. By maintaining the effect for a very short period of time, she could alter the weight of multiple connected objects and reduce the expenditure of magic.

Lightning easily caught up with the bomb and guided it towards the mangonel situated on one side of the city gate.

Halfway through the air, the young girl perceived the fear in the eyes of the knights standing on top of the city wall. They raised their crossbows and flintlocks, and fired towards the sky to shoot her down. However, she knew that it was difficult enough for them to hit a bird flying freely in the sky, not to mention that most weapons did not have sufficient range to hit her at her current distance.

Subsequently, the bomb hit the mangonel right on, and following

a huge boom, a blazing red fireball lit up at once and swelled rapidly. The nearby guards were unable to dodge it in time and were instantly devoured by the flames. As violent blasts swept across the city wall, the oil boilers toppled and were quickly ignited. The blazes followed the spill flow of the hot oil and ignited the explosives that were placed at one corner. Explosions followed one after another, destroying everything in the vicinity and filling the place with nothing but flames and thick smoke. The knights, who were preparing for battle just a while ago, hastily fled in all directions. Many lost their direction in the thick smoke and fell straight down the city wall. Others floundered about in the sea of fire or rolled on the floor to put out the flames on their bodies.

The top of the city wall had turned into hell on earth.

...

"Their defense line has collapsed," commented Sylvie. She was observing the billows of thick smoke on the city wall, with a trace of pity in her expression.

"These people deserve it," added Nightingale, who was expressionless. "If we failed, they would've become even worse."

"Someone has to pay the price in this battle. If it isn't them, it's us," Roland opined, while pretending to be calm. He then beckoned to Iron Axe behind him. "Blow the horn and order the seizure of this city."

He did not want to lament the cruelty of war or expound the

value of peace at this time. Above a fight for power or a battle for survival, this was a collision of ideas and classes. Whenever a backward class was displaced, it would not leave the stage quietly, but rather, it needed to be sent off with a huge amount of bloodshed.

To Roland, it was always better that the blood was spilt by the enemies.

"As you command, Your Highness!" The latter bowed neatly and departed the ship.

Soon, the signal for the general offensive resounded through the pier area.

...

As a member of the Fourth Commando, Nail's target was to destroy the palace gate.

As the platoon entered the Inner City, its advance was abruptly impeded. Here, they faced a strong counterattack from the enemy.

"Edgar's injured, carry him down quickly!"

"F\*ck, where's the field artillery?"

"They are blocked off by debris and have to detour!"

"Prepare the weapons. These monsters are charging right up!"

Nail slapped his own cheek forcefully before he filled a cartridge with bullets and handed it to a teammate in front of him. A volley of rifle fire sounded, puncturing thousands of holes in the crazed people charging at them. Blood splattered all over as they fell to the ground. Those who followed behind continued to pounce at the commandos recklessly. They did not slow down even if their arms, abdomens or other body parts had been struck.

These were certainly not militiamen. Nail felt his limbs become numb. The enemies were wearing either half-plates or chain armors and wielded excellent weapons, with everything from swords to crossbows. He had heard from the knowledgeable Jon that only the king's guards possessed such a complete range of equipment. Unfortunately for Jon, his knowledge was not able to protect him at last. During a previous assault by the enemy, he was critically impaled by a bolt that was shot at him from sideways.

Hope he can persevere until Miss Angel arrives.

"Retreat, the Fourth Commando, retreat!"

"The three squads are ready to fire!"

The veterans, with no concern about economizing their use of bullets, shot precisely at their targets. In one breath, they emptied their cartridges and immediately retreated to the back line, so as to shorten the time interval between the suppression fires. Five

commando teams took turns to shield the others along the main street. This was the first time that Nail had seen this method of taking turns to fire ever since revolving rifles replaced flintlocks.

However, their enemies did not attack from only one direction.

Suddenly, a platoon of crazed people leapt at them from a streetside house. Before most of the veterans could turn their guns, the platoon was already in their midst.

Screams and curse were heard at once. Nail watched helplessly as a teammate was cut into half by a red-eyed guard right in front of him. Although the guard was shortly struck dead by the other teammates, Nail knew that this particular teammate could not be resuscitated even by Miss Angel herself.

"Where are those bastard artillerymen?"

"Help me! Ouch... my legs!"

"Continue firing!"

As he heard his captain screaming instructions, Nail gritted his teeth and used his sleeve to wipe off the blood stains on a cartridge. He picked up a gun on the floor and reloaded it with the cartridge. Then, he aimed at an enemy who was tussling with his teammates and pulled the trigger.

Although he was afraid, the trainings that he had attended

reminded him constantly that while facing a strong opponent, it was necessary to stick closely with his platoon and make use of the team's collective strength in order to have a chance of survival.

Just then, Nail heard the loud call of a support unit from behind him. "The artillery battalion has run into trouble on East Street. Lord Brian has sent us to assist you!"

"No matter who you people are, hurry forth!" The captain cried out without looking back once.

The support unit pulled two carts up the street. Noticeably, the weapons equipped on the carts were none other than Mark I type HMG. When their shooting positions were fixed, the guns discharged long rows of fire at the new wave of charging crazed army.

# Chapter 506: No One Could Escape

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In an instant, a cloud of dust and ashes sprang up from the street. As soon as the "Crack! Crack!" sounds of shooting began, the enemies stopped dead in their tracks and appeared to burst into plumes of blood. The dense hail of bullets seemed to form an invisible wall that blocked the forward motion from the drugged soldiers.

"Nicely done!"

"Die, monsters, die!"

Nail clasped his hands in excitement. Sparks flew off the enemy's armor as they were bombarded by the heavy machine guns. Compared with revolvers, heavy machine guns were much more efficient and powerful. They were able to kill a man with just a single shot to the head or chest, and they could easily cause severe injuries to limbs as well. A revolver could barely stop someone from attacking. Best of all, there was no interval between each shot of the heavy machine guns. The target would likely be hit even if several shots missed their mark.

Strands of white smoke escaped from the muzzles of the guns and drifted into the air after the sounds of shooting died down. Unable to compete with the heavy machine guns, the crazed army retreated in a panic, leaving numerous bodies behind. Those who sustained critical injuries from the bullets were lying on the ground moaning and wailing, having completely lost their ability to fight, much less drag themselves from harm's way. Nail caught sight of the terror in their eyes.

'Guns in the air!' The unit leader shouted aloud.

Thinking of the comrade who was violently slashed in half right in front of him, Nail coolly raised his rifle without the slightest hesitation.

The army was finally able to march forward after the road had been cleared.

When the five commandos arrived at the palace gate, they immediately circled out a shooting field as instructed during the training, while at the same time monitored the movements on the streets. To prevent a pincer attack from the enemies, the army responsible for taking the inner city was divided into three wings. Each wing would march along one of the three main streets and serve as a flank for another. In this way, the First Army would be able to defend against enemies coming from all directions.

However, Nail noticed the real combat was far more complicated than the training. The south street was devoured by the flames, and it was almost impossible for them to pass. His own troops, on the other hand, were hindered by the crushed stones and became scattered as the battle progressed. Meanwhile, the soldiers were overwhelmed by the extent of the counterattacks they encountered, and they had completely forgotten to watch for the flag signals from Miss Lightning. A commando that should have belonged to his wing was missing, and gunshots could be heard everywhere in the Inner City.



Fortunately, they were the first wing to arrive at the gathering place.

An hour later, the other wings trickled into the palace gate one after another, slowly followed by the field artilleries.

The hot air balloon once again appeared above the palace. As the four bombs burned the garden wall and the iron gate to the ground, the final storming of the fortified castle began.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Your Majesty, they're already at the palace gate. Please, run for your life!" Osborne, the imperial bodyguard, urged in anxiety. "There isn't much time left!"

Timothy silently sat at the bedside in his bedroom, completely motionless. This was exactly where his father had taken his own life many years ago. Now it appeared to be his turn.

He had usurped the power of Prince Gerald, his biggest rival, by making him a scapegoat for the death of King Wimbledon III, and he had thereby ascended the throne. Within one year after becoming King, he had unified the Eastern and Northern regions in succession, driven away Garcia, his third sister, and quickly became the most powerful man in the country.

He had thought it would be just a matter of time before he occupied the Western Region and unified the whole Kingdom of

Graycastle. However, he had not expected that the situation would suddenly take a turn for the worse. The turn was so sudden and severe that he was caught fully unprepared.

First, the crazed army had failed its mission to attack and conquer Border Town. Afterwards, the unexpected explosion had further shaken his confidence.

In a matter of three days, all of his advantages were gone.

When he received the message from Redwater City, he had never thought there would be only three days to prepare. The snow in the Northern Region had yet to melt, and it was still too early to start conscription since farmers were busy with the spring plowing. He immediately sent a letter to the new Duke in the Eastern Region for help, but it was likely that the Duke would just now be receiving the letter and probably had yet to read its contents.

In the end, he was forced to fight against the enemies in haste. He had the help of many well-trained fighters including knights in King's City, the mercenaries, the patrol team, and the guards and squires of the nobles nearby. Nevertheless, to his astonishment, the towering city wall that he had put so much faith in simply collapsed on the very first day of the battle.

"Son of a b\*tch!" Timothy suddenly picked up the candelabrum on the nightstand and smashed it to the floor with all his strength. "You damn bastard... How can you ever defeat me if you haven't colluded with the witches and surrendered to the demons?!"

"Your Majesty..."

"Yes, the demons!" There was a tinge of dryness and tremor in his furious howl. "The church is crap! They've promised to kill the witches, but instead they have decided to just let Roland Wimbledon go! If it isn't the aid from witches, what else has made his firearms so much more powerful than mine? What else has enabled him to easily attack from above? I have far more laborers and alchemists, and I'm hundreds of times wealthier than he is! There's only one possible explanation: The demons in hell are helping him!"

Two explosions went off below the palace, and the glass windows started to rattle. He could hear muted yelling outside. This was the sound of his guards' last attempts to hold off the enemy.

"No, I can't die!" Timothy thought resentfully. "It would be too kind of me to commit suicide now. My brother is the one that should go to hell."

"Let's get into the secret tunnel." He tried to stand up, but his legs were too shaky to support his weight. The guard stepped in and grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Osborne was relieved. He carried Timothy on his back and asked the guards at the door to join them. They walked toward the hearth together.

The secret tunnel had both a trap-door and a fixed gate. Once the

fixed gate was shut, the entrance of the tunnel would be blocked permanently. The underground maze was filled with God's Stones of Retaliation and hidden traps. Due to the complexity of the tunnel's structure, Timothy had not yet had a chance to fully explore it. It was possible that the tunnel existed even before the construction of the palace.

When the group of six arrived at a large lounge area in the tunnel, Timothy ordered that they halted and asked them to take a rest while they waited for a chance to escape.

Although the tunnel had many exits, with the farthest one leading to the outer city, it was still very risky to plunge into action in the broad daylight. Timothy clearly remembered that Roland had a witch who could carry gunpowder to the sky.

The safest option was to wait until it was dark and quiet before exiting the tunnel. Given that the tunnel was fully protected by God's Stones, it was impossible for witches to sneak in.

"Your Majesty, since we won't set out until midnight, please take a nap here." The imperial bodyguard took out a blanket from the chest and unrolled it on the ground.

Timothy lay down. His brows furrowed when he smelled the damp, musty blanket. Feeling anxious and lost, Timothy could hardly fall asleep.

Where should I go next? The Northern Region or the Eastern Region?

There were nobles who supported him in both areas, and the dukes there were newly assigned... However, would they still be obedient once they learned that King's City had fallen?

Or... the church?

As soon as the idea of turning to the church for help crossed his mind, the thought was stuck and would not leave. Anyway, all those great nobles were just hangers-on. Even if they knew his brother was in collusion with the witches, they would still knuckle down to Roland upon threats and duress, just as the nobles in Longsong Stronghold. Yet the church... The church claimed that they would not tolerate a single witch, and they would certainly not tolerate a noble who supported a great number of them.

Although these church scoundrels were conceited and foolish, at least they were not too stupid to condone the demons and allow them to spread their power in the Kingdom of Graycastle so scrupulously.

If the church could support him, he would even be willing to sacrifice the kingdom of his father's.

Until... Until he could send Roland Wimbledon to the guillotine and torture those damn witches to death, he would never give up!

In the dim torch light, Timothy made up his mind.

After midnight, the group of people fled King's City via the longest passage of the tunnel.

They exited the tunnel and quietly made their way through the outskirts of town. However, they had yet to cover half a mile before the surrounding fields were suddenly lit up by hundreds of torches!

"Your Majesty, run..." Osborne's words stopped abruptly on the tip of his tongue.

There was no need for any explanation at this moment. The enemies had apparently planned out everything long before. They launched a perfect ambush and encircled the six of them, blocking all possible exits through which they could flee for their lives.

Timothy's heart turned cold. He knew there was no escape.

# Chapter 507: The Wind-up

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"Your Majesty, the road to the palace has been cleaned up, and the city is yours now!"

Iron Axe exclaimed in excitement as he knelt before Roland.

The battle started yesterday and did not end until early this morning. After entering the city, the First Army only spent four hours to complete their two main missions, seizing the palace in the inner city and taking the great church in the east. The next steps would be to clear out the enemies and eliminate Timothy's resistance.

Roland glanced around and noticed that everyone was exhilarated. The soldiers in the First Army and the witches were in high spirits. If he had made the official announcement, they would have probably been cheering for victory, but he had not yet. After Timothy's rule had been overturned, he was the King of the Kingdom of Graycastle even without a coronation ceremony.

However, Roland felt surprisingly calm and peaceful.

This "magnificent capital city", the political and economic center of the Kingdom of Graycastle, did not resonate with him, nor did he feel belonged to its soil. To Roland, it was simply an ordinary city, even less developed than Longsong Stronghold. The only thing that delighted him was that the chaos created by the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince had finally come to an end. Now he could concentrate on the development of his

territory.

Having said that, it was still a victory, a significant triumph. Roland believed by the time the news spread throughout the Kingdom, he would have built a greater reputation and gained more booming authority in the country. Subsequently, he could use his influence to recruit more talents and further the reforms. The plan for the spring offensive that he had been preparing for the last four months was half completed. The only territory yet to be conquered was the south. Roland looked toward where Fallen Dragon Ridge and the farther Southernmost Region lay. That was the territory he had to seize.

He took a deep breath, put the thought behind him. "Let's enter the city!" he announced.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe stood up with great respect and delivered his command to the guarding soldiers who had been eagerly waiting for instruction. "Column of Twos, protect your new King and advance!"

The soldiers raised their weapons in unison and shouted, "Long live King Wimbledon!"

"Long live His Majesty!"

Roland stepped off the warship and set out for the palace.

...



There were few people on the streets when the army entered the city gate. Traces of the fight could still be seen, more in the areas close to the palace than anywhere else.

In the inner city, he saw property destruction, traffic barriers, broken limbs and blood stains everywhere. Although the First Army was able to occupy the palace in a short time, it was the most intense battle they had ever come across.

Roland's heart ached when he saw the ruins on both sides of the street. The casualties were still unknown. However, there had been more than 20 soldiers' bodies sent to the rear, despite the fact that Nana had come to rescue in a timely fashion. If the little girl had not offered to help, the number would have been at least three times higher.

When Roland entered the palace area, the guards knelt down. Two columns of soldiers neatly lined up on their knees along the road leading to the castle. Such a scene was rarely seen among the First Army, where military salutation was commonly administered. Roland did not stop them. He could tell from their thrilled looks that these people were not greeting him as a military member, but were paying their respects to the new King as subjects of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

As Roland passed through the green castle garden, an old memory from childhood suddenly struck him. Three blue stone edifices arranged in a triangular shape surrounded the aquatic garden, it was where the Wimbletons had been living for generations. On the left stood the Hall of Sky Dome where

banquets and ceremonies were often held. Unfortunately, it had been completely destroyed by a bomb, save the ten soaring stone pillars. On the right lay the City Hall and the library, both of which were guarded by the First Army at the moment.

In the middle stood the most magnificent Holy Temple of Double Towers. Its structure was similar to that of skyscrapers in the modern world, with an oval three-story podium building as its base. It was even bigger than the castle area in Border Town. On either side of the podium building was a lofty tower. One tower was shaped like a King's crown, the other a Queen's, both representing the supreme power of the royal family. In the center of the double towers hung two crossed iron cables, representing the two guns on the Kamon. Both the design of the architecture and the theory behind it were masterpieces that could go down in history and remain immortal.

Roland stepped onto the long spiral staircase and entered the Holy Temple. It was strange that he knew every single chamber and hallway here, despite this being his first visit. In the temple, aside from the armed soldiers, there was also a group of fidgeting nobles. When Roland went in, they all knelt to greet him.

"Please rise."

Roland enthroned himself as a matter of course and surveyed them from above.

He caught sight of several familiar faces among the nobles:: Lauren Moore, Treasurer; Bullet Flynn, Minister for Diplomacy; Pilaw, Minister of Justice; Marshall, Director of Intelligence;

Marquis Wyke, Prime Minister, etc.

These people used to work for King Wimbledon III, and some of their family histories could even be traced back to the time when the Wimbledon family settled in. When Timothy Wimbledon had succeeded to the throne, they had all pledged allegiance to the new King. Now, they apparently planned to play the same trick on him according to the usual practice.

Unfortunately for them, Roland did not need them.

This was not a negotiation but a trial.

"Timothy Wimbledon is suspected of the murder of Prince Gerald, treason, as well as collusion with the church. He's now been taken into custody and will be subject to severe punishment. Soon his conviction will be publicized and known by the whole country. Do you want to say anything about it?"

"These are all capital offenses. I once tried to stop him but failed." Marquis Wyke ventured first. "You've driven away a plague on the Kingdom of Graycastle, Your Majesty."

All the other nobles chimed in.

"Really?" Roland sneered. "When he was committing these crimes, were you standing with folded arms or holding a candle to the devil? Don't tell me that you tried to stop him with your vain persuasions."

"Well..." The Marquis frowned. "Your Majesty, you don't know the real situation. Timothy promoted a lot of his loyal followers, such as Lanry, Scar and Marquis Morris, after he took charge. We could command neither the knights nor the conscripted army."

"Yes, Your Majesty. That was indeed the truth."

"He didn't even try Prince Gerald before sending him to the guillotine." Pilaw coughed while defending himself. "The executor was also a knight. We couldn't stop him."

"So, you're saying that everything that happened this year had nothing to do with you?" Roland despised these ministers even more. They were not handy assistants to the King, but rather a group of bloodsuckers feeding on the benefits granted by the royal family, only caring about their own interests. Perhaps, these aristocratic ministers had been of great help to the King when the Kingdom of Graycastle had initially been founded, but they had gone downhill in the past few hundred years. "Well, since you insist on your innocence, let's play a game."

"G-Game?" All of them were taken by surprise.

"A 'trial game' where I question and you answer." Roland's eyes flitted across each of the nobles. "There are ten questions in total. You'll be out of the game if you lie. Remember, you only have one chance to answer each question."

# Chapter 508: The Game

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"Your... Your Majesty, I... I don't understand." Marquis Wyke wiped the sweats from his forehead. "What... What do you mean by 'out of the game'?"

"Those who are out will either be hanged, banished from the kingdom, or sentenced to heavy labor in the mines. Or, perhaps, all of their assets will be confiscated." The prince explained airily. "The rules of the game conform to the royal laws. It's fair enough."

"No, I've served the royal family faithfully since the reign of your father. You can't..."

"But now I'm the king. I can do whatever I want." Roland interrupted him and continued. "Don't panic. Those who have answered all of the ten questions correctly will get promoted or rewarded. It'd be boring if there were only punishments and no rewards, right?"

"I... can't accept this," said Sir Pilaw, shaking his head. "Those punishments you've mentioned should only be ordered by the court. We can't take such serious things so lightly. Your Majesty, I'm sorry I feel uneasy. Please allow me to take my leave."

He turned around and tried to exit the room, only to find that the door had been closed and that there were two expressionless soldiers now standing by the door. They blocked his exit and would not budge.

"I'm not asking for your opinion, Sir Pilaw," said Roland, "and, if you insist on quitting the game, I'm afraid I'll have to add one more punishment," he made a gesture as if shooting a gun and added, "that is, to shoot you."

The frightened nobles opened their eyes wide and spontaneously stepped back a few paces, while the soldiers around them lifted up their guns and calmly looked at them.

"So, now, time for the game." Roland stood up and clapped his hands. "The first question, did you get involved in the matter of forcing refugees to invade the Western Region? Let's start with you, Mr. Prime Minister."

"..." After a moment of silence, Marquis Wyke said, "I did follow Timothy's order to recruit refugees from the Eastern Region and the Southern Territory, but I did not take part in the other matter you stated."

He felt Nightingale lightly pinch his right shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I told you that you'd only have one chance to answer each question honestly." Roland waved his hand. "Take him down to the jail beneath this hall."

"Your Majesty, what I said is true..."

"No, you and I both know that you're still lying, even now." Roland promptly rejected the Prime Minister's appeal. He watched

him get dragged out into the hallway and then slowly said to everyone, "If you're smart, you'll understand that lying won't do you any good, because, I can tell whether or not you're telling me the truth."

The nobles all stood with mouths agape, and no one dared to speak.

"If nobody volunteers to answer the question, I'll just call out names." Roland looked at the Minister of Justice and said, "What about you? Sir Pilaw."

...

It had turned out just the way he had wanted. This was a trial.

He had to cut the Gordian knot by efficiently dealing with the nobles here in this manner. As he also had to handle the situation with the area to the south of Fallen Dragon Ridge, he could not afford to waste too much time here. The post-war city management would be transferred to the personnel trained by the City Hall, and the resistance they would meet was from the local nobles and Black Street gangs.

Given that he needed the city to smoothly get back to normal and that now there was not enough time and energy left for a long screening, he held the trial to quickly remove the guilty nobles who had worked in collusion with Timothy and to pick out the clean, honest nobles to work with. As for the Black Street problem, he would leave them to Theo.

After all, the purpose of the surprise attack was to prevent Timothy from using ordinary people to wage a meaningless, long-lasting war. If he were to just step away from the city after overturning Timothy's rule and leave the city in chaos, he would be no different from their previous King.

He did not plan to absorb King's City into his kingdom, nor did he want to find another agent to run the city for him. After a whole year of hard work and development, he just did not have the strength.

No matter to act against the noble or the church, he had the ability to beat them.

"Now, the last question, have you ever bullied or oppressed the people, including witches?"

After asking nine questions, less than 10 out of the over 50 still remained in the hall. Such a high outing rate did not shock Roland at all, as he knew for sure Timothy had already kicked the incapable ones out of the palace. They were the people who either thought he usurped the throne or questioned the cause of King Wimbledon III's death. However, what did surprise Roland was that there were still seven nobles working in the City Hall who had nothing to do with either Timothy's schemes or the church.

"Your Majesty, I'm guilty," said a noble, falling to his knees and sweating profusely. "I've ordered my men to beat up a civilian because he smeared my trousers with his feet. I failed to hold back



my anger at that time and..., but I just beat him. I did not kill him."

"I, I had a secret love affair with a shop owner's daughter, but she seduced me first!"

"My housekeeper slept with my wife while I was out hunting. I cut off his penis straight away instead of sending him to the court... But, Your Majesty, a housekeeper doesn't count, right?"

Roland did his best to keep a straight face while hearing those various, funny answers. Those trifles were not considered misdeeds or even mistakes by nobles usually, but now they were apparently so frightened by the questioning that they spat out all those things in fear that it would be regarded as lying.

After they had all given their answers, Roland cleared his throat and asked, "Is there anything else?"

"No," the nobles said.

When Nightingale pinched his left shoulder, he finally nodded and said, "Congratulations, you've passed."

The nobles were greatly relieved.

"I did say that the winners of the game would be rewarded... Trust me, I'll keep my word, especially when there're so many vacancies in the City Hall, but I still have one question." Roland looked at the two people standing at the back of the room, who

seemed to have never broken any laws since they hadn't said anything but "No" in reply for every question and their answers were all approved by Nightingale. "What're your names and positions in the City Hall?"

"I'm Alva Taber, Your Majesty," one of them replied, "and I'm in charge of the issues related to the star image."

"Blanche Orlando," the other person, a woman, said, "I'm the ceremonial officer."

"That's the reason. People in positions like theirs don't get many chances to do bad things... These two are indeed the only ones with clean hands in the City Hall." Roland went back to the throne and said, "You can leave the palace now. I'll send for you after I straighten up a few things with my family." He paused and added. "My way of ruling will be very different from my father's and Timothy's. You'll see that soon enough, and remember what got you through the game... Keep it up. This isn't going to be the last game you play."

The nobles withdrew submissively and then Roland left the hall and headed to the basement with Nightingale, thinking to himself,

"Time to meet my 'dear brother'."

# Chapter 509: To Become a King

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The dungeon of the palace was a childhood nightmare for Prince Roland. The feeling naturally came back to him as he was walking down the stone steps.

He started to search his memories and soon found the reason for this fear.

One day, Timothy invited Gerald, Garcia and little Roland to explore the basement of the palace hall together. The 12-year-old Roland had been so excited to finally get the chance to join their inner circle but had never expected what would happen next. Timothy had stolen the keys from the guards, locked Ronald into a jail cell and left with the other two kids while laughing.

Little Roland was left alone in the dark room. He had thought of the shrilling cries he occasionally heard throughout the hall. A guard had once told him that the cries were from wailing ghosts in the underground world beneath the palace. His teeth chattered with fright but he had not dared to cry out loud since he had been afraid of attracting the ghosts to him. At last, he huddled up in a corner, held his knees and pressed his face against them, sobbing uncontrollably. When Timothy, Gerald and Garcia returned to check how terrible he was, his face had been covered with his snot.

After that, Prince Roland had been too frightened to step back into the basement of the palace.

Roland now understood that the wails and shrills did not come from ghosts, but from the prisoners being questioned and tortured in the basement. The jail could not hold many prisoners which explained why little Roland had only been able to hear them every now and then.

Roland met Timothy Wimbledon in a small cell on the bottom floor of the basement. Compared with the jails in the Outer and Inner City, the place was pretty good. At least, it was dry and clean, without rats, cockroaches or stinky smells. This was the exact cell where the little Roland had been locked into and cried for an entire night.

Ironically, now Timothy swapped positions with Ronald.

Hearing unexpected noises, Timothy, who sat silently against the wall, opened his eyes and saw Roland.

This brother, that Prince Roland had feared the most in the past, looked almost the same as before. Like all the other descendants of the Wimbledon Family, he was gray-eyed and gray-haired. He resembled his father in appearance in that he wore short curly hair and had his father's nose and handsome face. However, his long, narrow eyes made his face a little ghastly, especially in the flickering torchlight.

Prince Roland had never dared to look into his brother's eyes before, but now, Timothy was just a helpless and defenseless stranger.

They looked at each other for a while during which nothing could be heard except the burning sounds of torches. Finally, Timothy was unable to veil his gaunt face any longer and gave up trying to overwhelm Roland with an aggressive attitude, for he found that it was useless now. The look in Timothy's eyes changed, and somehow he seemed to be terrified.

"Who the hell are you?" Timothy broke the silence.

His dry, emotional voice reverberated in the basement, from which Roland could easily tell that his brother was scared. Compared with Tilly, Timothy had had more interactions with Prince Roland and contributed a lot to his previous annoying and fickle behaviors. He felt that it was natural for Timothy, who had known Prince Roland quite well in the past, to spot something different in Ronald now and ask that question.

"I'm Roland Wimbledon," Ronald said as he had squatted down until his face was level with Timothy's and looked into his eyes, "You can't remember me?"

"No, you're not him," Timothy said in a trembling voice, "He could never look at me like this. He dared not look directly into my eyes." He heavily panted and continued, "I know... You're the real demon! You're not lured by demons. You're evil incarnate, wanting to steal my kingdom!"

Roland did not even want to bother explaining anything to a dying man like Timothy. Ronald said, "So what? You think you're better than the demons? You killed our father, framed our innocent elder brother and then executed him to keep the throne

you stole. You collaborated with the church, who our father hated the most. You compelled innocent people to invade the domain of Princess Garcia and you can't even spare your weakest and most powerless brother Prince Roland. In only one year, you conquered and destroyed so many cities, dragging the whole kingdom into chaos and making the people homeless. Even the demons wouldn't do this!"

Timothy hurriedly refuted, "No! I didn't kill our father. He killed himself. Just like you, he was controlled by demons!"

"Suicide?" Roland asked, frowning.

"Yes! He lay in the bed as usual and drove a dagger into his heart with a smile on his face!" Timothy answered.

"Not the witches?" Ronald questioned.

"No, he wore God's Stone of Retaliation! Damn it..." Timothy shouted hoarsely and added in a choked voice, "It just happened without any warning and I couldn't stop it at all!"

Roland looked back at Nightingale who slightly nodded to him.

"It must have been an attaching magic witch. Once she performed her magic power, she would not be affected by God's Stone," Roland thought, "And unlike witches from other organizations, the pure witches of the church could possibly find a chance to get close to the king." Prince Ronald quickly recalled an

incident that happened half a year ago when they were evacuating refugees. A witch tricked her way into the camps to assassinate Wendy by her ability to change her appearance. Connecting that incident to what had happened to King Wimbledon III, he thought the answer was clear.

If the church was the creator of those incidents, it could also explain the reason for the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince which clearly aimed at creating wars and chaos. He still needed somebody to testify this speculation and believed he would get something out of the High Priest of the King's City.

"But this can't be the justification of framing Gerald and expanding the war," Roland said in a deep voice. "You conspired with the church and used the Pills of Madness to create crazed soldiers. Have you ever thought that how many people would die of this?"

"Even if I didn't use the pills, who could guarantee that Garcia wouldn't use them? If they recognized me as the legitimate king at first, why would I destroy them mercilessly?" Timothy explained as he crawled to hold the railings. "And what do all these have to do with a demon like you? How the hell do you want to deal with me?"

"I want to expose your crimes, judge you and then send you to the guillotine. You'll end up like Gerald, except that you're proven guilty of unpardonable crimes for which even death penalty is not enough to serve the justice," Ronald said.

"No! You can't kill me. Demons like you can never stand in the

light, since powerful deities will wipe you out. If you want the Kingdom of Graycastle, you have to rely on me." Timothy yelled.

"Deities?" Roland grinned. "You mean the church?"

"You don't know them! The church's hidden strength is unfathomable. There're incredible things father had written down in his notes and they're the reason why he could not make up his mind to banish the church in his life!" Timothy cried out. "Pills are just one of their formidable methods. If they uncover your identity, there'll be no escape for you!"

"No, Timothy Wimbledon. I know much more than you think I do and I've got a clear idea of the road ahead. It's a hard road and you don't have the ability to lead the people to a bright future," Roland said slowly, "Your life must end here for the crimes you committed. But, relax, you aren't the only one who is going to hell."

With those words, Ronald stood up and walked out of the jail, leaving Timothy to cry alone without even turning his head.



# Chapter 510: The Flower of Revenge

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When he entered the basement of the palace, Hill Fawkes felt his heart tremble, not out of fear, but rather uncontrollable excitement.

The flickering flame of the torch seemed to dance for him, while his steps echoed praises off the stone floor.

He never felt the dark, quiet basement could be so wonderful.

After arriving at the ground floor of the basement, Theo searched his body again. He then patted his shoulder and whispered, "Go, and don't stay too long."

Hill nodded and walked excitedly into the darkness ahead... After a while, as he passed through a darkened walkway and approached the cage, he slowed down so he could fully savor this memorable moment.

He then saw the murderer who killed his wife,

Timothy Wimbledon.

At that moment, Hill covered his mouth, as his eyes were filled with tears... Everything that he had done before was not in vain,

and the outcome came earlier than he expected.

"My wife would smile at this sight," he thought.

"Who... is it?" Timothy asked. He turned around, leaned against the rails, and he desperately asked, "Is that you, demon... Did you change your mind?"

Hill came out of the shadows and paced to the cage.

Timothy was shocked and then became wary. He moved two steps back. "Who are you? Who let you in? Where is Roland Wimbledon? I want to see him!"

This was the formerly haughty king.

Hill had only seen what Timothy looked like from a distance in the ascending ceremony. At that time, he wore a crimson robe, a shining and noble crown, and he held a golden scepter in his hand. Surrounded by the Knights of King's City, he walked to the high platform step by step and accepted the coronation. Hill once hoped that he would become a good king who would give everyone a stable life, but the later raid tore the whole city, the acrobatic troupe, and the families apart. As a result, all these expectations for the future disappeared.

Now, he finally felt the sweetness of revenge—it did not contain any pity for this enemy or emptiness after success. Instead, all he felt was just sweetness and happiness, which warmed his cold

heart again... To his surprise, he found he actually was fond of this kind of feeling.

"I'm Hill Fawkes, Your Majesty," Hill said as he bowed. "I'm a member of 'Dove and Cylinder', and it's impossible for you to know me, but I know you."

"..." Timothy was stone-faced and speechless.

Hill did not care at all, however, and continued, "There should have been seven members in this acrobatic troupe, but we lost a partner because of you. Since then, the six of us left no longer focused on performing, but we hid among the Rats and hotels to inquire about your movements. After that, we organized and analyzed the information and sent it to Lord Roland." He paused, and then said, "By the way, we told him about your plan of developing snow powder and impressing militiamen to invade the Western Region. We also made the two saltpeter factories in the suburbs close down and transferred them to other places."

"What're you talking about?" Timothy squinted and said, "A hidden traitor who is proud of what he has done? A traitor who betrayed his king and reaped the benefits of betraying his dignity? I don't know anything about the 'Dove and Cylinder' at all. Stop your tricks, you lowlife!"

"Benefit? Betrayer? No... Your Majesty, I just followed my heart," Hill said quietly. "That partner is my wife. She died in your witch-hunting campaign. In prison, she was tortured and insulted, but the ultimate punishment for the murderer was just 25 silver royals."

Timothy's eyes glittered.

"Do you remember now?" Hill spread his hands and added, "Although the City Hall later gave three gold royals as compensation, it actually means nothing to me. My wife will never come back. She was not a witch, but she died because of you."

After a while, Timothy said, "I didn't do it."

This rather weak answer was as sweet as honey. Usually, this response would have been met by a sneer and a "so what?".

"At the time, Lanry, who executed the arrest, was your henchman. Even Steelheart Knight couldn't stop him. I just wanted a fair verdict, but the court and the City Hall rejected my appeal. There's no doubt that you were behind this..."

"No, enough! You lowlife!" Timothy could not help but roar, "Do you know what you're doing? If that witch-hunting campaign only wronged your wife, what you've done will ruin the Kingdom of Graycastle! Lord Roland? You idiot! Roland Wimbledon has been dead for a long time! Your master is a real demon! You decided to serve a demon just for a woman?"

"... Is that so?" Hill asked raising the corners of his mouth. "When I begged the Gods, there wasn't any response. At that moment, I swore that as long as I could get my revenge, even if he was a demon, I'd follow him to hell." He bowed with his hand on his chest and said, "Goodbye, Your Majesty. I'm much honored to have

aided in your destruction."

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When he returned to the basement's entrance, Theo nodded toward Hill. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, Your Excellency, please take me to see His Majesty Roland," Hill said, as he took a deep breath.

On the third floor of the palace, he finally saw the man whom he had served for the past six months—Roland Wimbledon looked much kinder than Timothy. Although they had the same gray hair and gray pupils, he did not have the arrogant temperament that kept people at arm's length. He did not even... look like a royal nobleman.

"I'm very grateful for your undercover work in King's City," said Roland. Hill was also surprised by his first sentence. "Thanks to your intelligence, I could prepare everything to conquer King's City at the lowest cost."

"Don't mention it, and I was doing what was right..."

"Certainly, I know you did that for revenge. Timothy will soon have his due verdict. Now that you have what you want, you can start a new life, but I hope that you can continue to work for me." Roland got up, walked in front of him, and looked at him. "There is still much to do to help the city restore stability and even return to

its past prosperity. For example, Rats need to be controlled, and the restless noblemen also need to be watched, but Theo won't be able to cope with these tasks alone. What do you think? The members of your acrobatic troupe and you can work in a secret and formal position to protect the people of the city from a similar tragedy."

"I'd love to, Your Majesty," Hill said and solemnly knelt down. "Even if you didn't say so, I'd still follow you forever. You fulfilled what you promised before, and now it's my turn to do so," he said slowly. "The rest of Hill Fawkes' life will belong to you."

The flower of revenge finally bore its most delicious fruit.

# Chapter 511: Whispers at Nightfall

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Nightingale lay by the window and watched the city under the night sky.

Dim shadows spread under the darkness and outlined the silhouette of King's City's wall. Under the light, the three walls showed some minor differences. The nearest palace wall was a light gray color, lit up by burning resin torches. At a glance, it looked like a jeweled belt with overlapping areas of light and dark.

Far away was the inner city wall, which was gray mixed with black, and it looked like a long snake that surrounded the city. Even after King's City had a new ruler, the Inner City still kept its splendor. It was the first time that Nightingale saw a place busier and livelier than Border Town. This short, yet fierce war did not have any effects on the noble and the rich, so they still joyfully indulged themselves at night.

However, beyond that, the sky was suddenly darker as if all the light was blocked by the inner city's wall. The darkness covered everything including the most splendid bluestone city wall, where Nightingale saw only some stones sparkle from the moon's light. The Outer City just looked like most of the cities she had seen before. These cities fell into silence after the night came. In the vast darkness, the Inner City's light seemed a bit dull but it did not stop people from dancing and singing. For some reason, Nightingale suddenly thought about how human beings were cornered into this part of the continent, and the vast Land of Dawn was being devoured by the darkness bit by bit. There were demons and evil beasts that lurked about but most people had no idea and still partook in what little entertainment they had.

"Phew, I'm beyond tired." Wendy's voice interrupted Nightingale's thoughts, as the red-headed witch rubbed her shoulders and lay down next to Nightingale by the window.

Nightingale asked, "Have they fallen asleep already?"

"Yes. They finally got tired after all the commotion they've stirred up today." Wendy yawned. "I don't know where their energy comes from. They flew around on hydrogen balloons the entire day and still they demanded to hear a story before going to bed." Wendy finished.

"You should thank His Majesty for that." Nightingale laughed. "If he didn't punish them to do three sets of exercises, I'm afraid they'd go out to explore the night instead of listening to your story." Nightingale turned around to look through the gap between the balcony and the bedroom and saw Maggie leaned over Lightning. Maggie's white hair almost covered Lightning's entire body. "Those two seem to really hit it off." Nightingale expressed.

Since the rooms in the royal palace were more spacious and each living room was accompanied by two bedrooms. The witches that followed Roland on this expedition lived in four-person rooms with each other. These rooms were the most splendid places in the whole Kingdom of Graycastle. The carpets and bedding in the guest rooms were all made of excellent materials, some of which Nightingale recognized, like velvet and silk. Other things were made of materials she had never seen before.



"Yes." Wendy also smiled gently. "I heard from Lady Tilly once that Maggie used to turn into a pigeon and slept while squatted on the roof. Any little noise would wake her and she only kept pigeon form to escape any possible dangers. Now, she finally can have a peaceful sleep just like a normal little girl." She paused for a while and then continued, her voice filled with emotion, "We're very lucky."

Nightingale did not answer her... She did not need to. All the Witch Cooperation Association's witches who survived would feel the same way. When they struggled between life and death, it was the Lord of Border Town who reached out to them and promised them a new world. Now, not only did their sisters see hope, but they also found that this new world was within reach. After the Holy Mountain, they pursued for hundreds of years, became a reality, their gratitude and recognition could not be expressed within a few words.

They fell into a long silence until the midnight bell ranged from far away, and Wendy said, "Do you... want to go back and have a visit?"

Nightingale asked confused, "Go back to where?" She still was not fully awakened.

"Silver City, your hometown," Wendy pointed south and said, "It's only half a day's journey from here. If you let Maggie carry you, it won't even take an hour. You, you do have a little brother living there, right?"

Nightingale did not think she would bring this up, and after a

little hesitation, she shook her head and explained, "While we restore the city's order, there are potential enemies everywhere. So I can't leave His Majesty now. Besides, when everything in the Kingdom of Graycastle is settled, I'll have many opportunities to visit Silver City. There is no hurry."

"I thought you'd emphasize that you've already removed yourself from the Gilen family, just like you did in the past," Wendy said relieved, "You seem like... you don't hate your little brother anymore?"

"Without his betrayal, I wouldn't have met you, let alone His Highness." Nightingale smiled. "You always say to me, 'Getting rid of the past nightmares doesn't mean separating yourself from the past.' Now I finally understand the second half of the sentence. It's okay as long as I live a better life than before."

"Well... it seems like a good proverb pieced together." Wendy raised her brow. "I didn't know you had such literary skills."

"So I won't sneak out secretly, and you can go to sleep in peace." Nightingale uttered as she held Wendy's hands. "It's late."

"Uh-huh." Wendy huffed as the two of them crawled on the big bed, and Wendy summoned a slight breeze to blow out the candle. "Good night," Wendy mumbled.

Nightingale replied, "Good night."

After Nightingale was sure that Wendy was asleep, she got up from the bed, went into the Mist, and walked to Roland's room.

Next, it was her time.

Darkness was on her side.

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The next day, Roland received both good news and bad news from Iron Axe. The good news was that after one night's interrogation, High Priest Ferry finally admitted Hermes' plan of secretly replacing Wimbledon III and issuing the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince.

The bad news was that the church had plotted this war for a long time, so they could weaken the military potential of the Kingdom of Graycastle and occupy it more quickly. They actually occupied many areas, like the two provinces in the southeast of the kingdom. If Roland had not traversed time to become Prince Roland, this plan would probably have destroyed the Kingdom of Graycastle already.

"Did you hear all of that?" Roland asked Theo, who stood beside him. "Go spread the news, especially about the church's true intentions and Timothy's collaboration with them. The more details you disclose, the better. I want every citizen of the city to know what they have done."

Theo answered, "Yes."

Then Roland turned to Iron Axe and ordered, "Send out another paddle ship to bring Barov and Kyle Sichi here."

Iron Axe seemed embarrassed, which was uncommon for him. "It's no problem to fetch the director, but the chief alchemist... Will he really agree to leave the lab and waste his precious time on the road?" Iron Axe questioned.

"I'll write to Kyle." Roland frowned. "There's a saying that if you don't come back and visit your hometown when you get rich, it's like wearing a black suit in the middle of the night. What's the point if people can't see it? When a man learns impressive skills, he shouldn't mind showing it off. When Kyle was in Redwater City, he always competed with the Alchemist Workshop in King's City. As they say, two of a trade never agree. Now Kyle has a chance to beat his rival, so I don't believe that he won't come."

This is also a good opportunity to enlist all the alchemists in King's City in one swoop and make them serve me."

# Chapter 512: An Old Friend and a New Friend

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There was no doubt that King's City was a huge treasure trove.

Although it was a rather backward city, and those magnificent buildings meant nothing in Roland's eyes, it was still the most brilliant pearl in the Kingdom of Graycastle.

In terms of population, the number of noblemen here far exceeded that of other cities—the first thing anyone who lost their rank and land would do was to come to King's City to seek new opportunities. If landless nobles and knights canonized by the royalty were counted, then the population was even bigger. For example, nearly 20% of the citizens in the Inner City were noblemen. Most of them received primary education and could read and write, making them all potential officials who deserved training in Roland's eyes. After all, without land and property, they would not resist the new policy too much, and their excellent insight would allow them to accept new things quicker.

In terms of industries, King's City also hosted the best men of all trades. Besides the merchant and craftsmen unions, it also had the biggest alchemist association and the only astrologer association. Roland coveted these talents and summoned Barov and Kyle Sichi to utilize these men as much as possible.

In terms of wealth, the value of all the collections in the palace was ten times that of Duke Ryan, with gold royals, jewelry, and golden handicrafts filling up several storehouses. This, combined with the properties of the other ministers who fell from power

along with Timothy, totaled an astonishing number. If their properties were all confiscated, then the City of Neverwinter would be well taken care of for two or three years. However, Roland did not plan to take away all of the treasures, since it would waste too much time. Besides, he would need a lot of wealth to take over King's City and maintain its stability. Neither keeping the money stacked up in the basement nor using it freely was meaningful, so it was best to circulate it.

If possible, Roland would love to spend half a year to process all these resources. But compared with King's City, which lay far in the middle, it was more important to take Fallen Dragon Ridge and the Southernmost Region, which lay next to the Western Region.

Soon after Iron Axe left, one guard reported, "Your Majesty, outside the palace, a businesswoman called Margaret wants to see you."

Roland's eyes lit up. "Bring her to me."

When the businesswoman walked into the hall, he smiled and arose from his seat to welcome her. "We finally meet again."

"I didn't expect we would meet in the palace of the Kingdom of Graycastle this time." Margaret raised her hem and curtsied to Roland. "You always surprise me, Your Highness... no, now I should call you Your Majesty."

"It doesn't matter, the enthronement hasn't been held, so I'm not the king yet." Roland waved his hands.

"You're not anxious about this, and you do behave in a kingly way." Margaret covered her mouth and smiled. "From now on, there will be business opportunities everywhere in King's City. As an old friend, you should take more care of me."

"Of course, even if you didn't come to me, I'd find you." He laughed openly. "You may not know this, but Border Town and Longsong Stronghold are going to be integrated into one big city. The steam engine company has opened several more production lines, and the yield will triple. It'll also produce more new commodities, and I promise they'll be unparalleled in the Four Kingdoms."

"I've already seen how creative you can be, so we can talk about these things later in great detail." Margaret nodded. "But that's not why I'm here today. I want to ask another favor from you."

"Oh?" Roland asked with great interest. "Tell me."

"Could... we move to another place to talk?" she glanced around the room and asked quietly.

"If the Chamber of Commerce's financial resources can't solve this problem, and now we have to be secretive about it... Has she really encountered so much trouble?" The prince thought for a moment. "Then let's go to my study."

...

The study, located on the top floor of the Tower of Crown, belonged to King Wimbledon III originally, and it was also where Prince Roland wanted to be the most when he was a child—this was the only place where he could see his reticent father. However, the reason that Roland picked this place was only that it was too high to have any secret passages, and there was only one set of winding stairs leading to the top of the tower, making it easy to defend and hard to attack.

"Can you talk about it now?"

There were only him and Margaret left in the room, plus Nightingale, who had already hidden herself.

"Sorry, Your Majesty, I swore to someone that I'd tell this to only you..." She bowed respectfully. "Thunder wants to see you."

"Thunder?" Roland was shocked. "You mean the most famous explorer in the Fjords? Didn't he... just die in a shipwreck?"

"A real explorer may believe in the three gods, but he wouldn't go to them so easily." Margaret shook her head. "He doesn't want to reveal his whereabouts, especially to Lightning, which is why I need to tell you in secret. Thunder had planned to contact you through Tilly, but he didn't expect that you'd occupy King's City so soon, so he changed his plan at the last minute." The businesswoman halted for a while. "He also said that he found some unbelievable things in the east of the Shadow Islands that you'd definitely be interested in, and that they may have



something to do with the ruins from hundreds of years ago."

"Wait... is he in King's City now?"

"Yes, he arrived here yesterday. He made this decision after meeting with me."

"You don't seem surprised by his coming back from the dead." Roland was surprised. "Have you known about it for a long time?"

Margaret nodded.

"So the reason that you came to Border Town to do businesses the first time wasn't that I sent the guards out, but to find Lightning, right?"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you this from the start," she said while holding her hand to her chest. "Lightning wore a Magic Stone, so Thunder could find where she was. He sent me there just to make sure that she was safe. After learning that Lightning was settled in your domain, he decided to hide his information to keep his daughter far away from being an explorer."

"That's it." Roland understood it instantly. "I didn't ask for more details about Thunder's death at the time, and Margaret did speak the truth in some sense, so Nightingale couldn't detect her lies but could only tell that she had no bad intentions towards witches. So there was a reason for this 'coincidence'. Without Lightning, my steam engine trade wouldn't have found business routes so

quickly."

"Now King's City is still a mess, so I can't leave the palace," Roland said, after a minute's consideration. "If Thunder wants to meet me, you can bring him here. I promise I won't divulge his information to Lightning."

"Thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty." Margaret looked very grateful and she bowed again. "I'll deliver your reply to him as soon as possible."

Soon after the servants sent the businesswoman away, Roland heard his guard's report when he got back to the hall. "Your Majesty, a nobleman outside the palace claimed to be your old friend and made a fuss about coming inside."

It surprised him a little. He knew the lower noblemen who were not influenced by the spring offensive would come here to snoop, but he did not expect they would come so soon. Logically, they should have waited to see the policy trends, and they should not come forward so proactively before Timothy was beheaded... He also used to be a prince, so how could he be on good terms with a lower nobleman? "What's his name?"

"Sir Yorko, Your Majesty."

## Chapter 513: "Magic Hand" Yorko

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"Pfft... ahem." Roland almost choked on his own saliva. A pale-looking, slightly oversized man with stubby fingers and a curly Mohawk appeared within his mind. Roland had almost forgotten about him, but he quickly realized who he was once the name was mentioned. His appearance was as clear as if they had parted just yesterday.

The visit was not a surprise; Prince Roland had once been so close with Yorko that he would have given him the shirt off his back. Prince Roland had been out of his mind and was self-loathing after being fiercely rejected by Tilly, realizing that he would never fit into Gerald, Timothy and Garcia's circle. Yorko's appearance was basically his salvation. Not only did he bring Roland along to the brothel, allowing him a taste of the pleasures of a noble, but he also introduced him to a gang of evil associates to boss around, giving him the prestige that he would never have in the palace. Even though these things were not righteous, he had been Prince Roland's best friend, at least at that time.

Roland wanted to reject Knight Yorko, but these memories made him realize that he would not do that if he were still Prince Roland. Not to mention that he needed someone to attract the rest of the nobility to serve him. After a little contemplation, he finally decided to meet the popular "Magic Hand" of King's City.

"Bring the knight to my study," he ordered, "and remember to confiscate his God's Stone of Retaliation."

...

Returning to the Tower of Crown, Roland soon met the "old friend" he was waiting for.

"Oh my God! Your Majesty... I didn't expect you to come back so quickly and defeat your demon older brother so easily!" Prince Roland used to address his siblings as a clan of demons, and Yorko had gone along with this statement in private. His image was very similar to what Roland could remember. Yorko dashed forward and gave Roland a warm hug as soon as he opened the door and walked into the study.

Roland reluctantly patted his back like he used to and said, "I didn't expect you to come so soon either."

Despite the fact that Yorko's average appearance did not relate to his title of "Casanova", his round chin always gave people a sense of inexplicable intimacy. Considering his neatly-shaved beard, the clean-as-a-pin attire, the perfect smell of his cologne, and his legendary techniques, it was no surprise that so many ladies fell for him.

"I'm different from them! Those cowards are still worrying about Timothy's remaining power, but I know that you would never let him off so easy!" Yorko grinned and asked, "Since you're back, would you like to have a drink tonight at the Golden Lane? Do you want me to make an appointment with Mrs Rother or Miss Kingfisher? Ever since that one-night stand, they've been missing you."

Roland suddenly felt a chill from behind his back, an ice-cold gaze pierced through his body, casted directly towards Yorko.

The knight felt the change too. His voice abruptly ceased, and he started to look around in doubt. "How come it suddenly got so cold in here?"

"What one-night-stand? I had nothing to do with them," Roland immediately objected. "Whatever they're feeling has nothing to do with me!"

Even if it did, it would only have something to do with Prince Roland... It was totally different from his true self, so what he said was still the truth. Nightingale should not be able to tell the difference.

As expected, the chilling sensation reduced drastically following his response.

"Oh? Is that so?" Yorko stroked his chin, "But you obviously spent a night with them!"

"It was way past curfew time, and I wasn't able to return to the palace. Otherwise, I would have had to sleep on the street," Roland emphasized. "Anyway, I didn't do anything that night, understand?"

There was a glimmer of doubt on Yorko's face, but his initial smile soon returned. "Well in that case, forget about them. Let's

meet some new ones today. You probably have no idea, but a classier brothel opened up right opposite the Golden Lane. I heard that the quality can be compared to private reserves of the nobles, and they only allow entry by invitation. I haven't had a chance to try it out myself yet. I'm sure there'll be no problem for you. What do you think?"

"No, I'm not going anywhere at night. I'm staying in the palace. "

"Oh, I understand," Yorko raised his brows and said. "There are quite a few beautiful attendants in the palace as well, so you should enjoy them first. In that case, I'll teach you my famous skills so none of them will forget about you." He sighed and said, "You used to be so eager to learn from me, but I thought it would be useless for you back then, even if you mastered the stunt. Now that you're about to become king, I'm afraid you'll have more lovers than I do. So, the stunt should be able to come in handy for you. After all, human energy is limited."

"Stop." Roland was close to covering Yorko's mouth with his hand. He dared not let Yorko continue. It was utterly a complete collection of dark histories. He did not want to bear the responsibilities of the awful things Prince Roland had done, especially not in front of Nightingale. "Listen, friend... I'm different now."

Yorko was stunned, but replied, "Of course. You're now the king, Your Majesty..."

"I don't mean that," Roland interrupted, "but you can also interpret it that way. As a king of the country, I definitely can't be

as ruthless as I used to be, understand?" He recalled Prince Roland's way of intimate conversation, hooked his arm around Yorko's neck, and said, "Speaking of which, just tell me what you have in mind. I don't believe that you came here, simply to reminisce about the past. You don't have to hide anything from me."

As expected, Yorko laughed and said, "In that case, I'll be straightforward. Your Majesty, can you please grant me an official position?"

"What?"

"What about making me your minister? I don't need to be in a key position, such Treasurer or Minister of Justice. Just let me manage the patrol team, like Steelheart Knight." He patted his bulging stomach and said, "I can assure you that the Rats would be obedient under my watch."

Roland could not help but silently roll his eyes. How dare he mention that? The reputation of King's City would be ruined if he held the Minister of Defense position. He would bring the patrol team to fool around and summon the men to beat up other Casanovas if he had any conflicts. It was scary to even think about it.

However, it could be good publicity if Yorko was given a suitable position. He would have a chance to be promoted during the throne alternation as long as he was willing to serve Roland. After all, Yorko had a clean background; he basically did not have any bad habits other than the fact that he could not control his sexual

desire. The key question was what kind of position was suitable for someone like him.

Roland contemplated for a while and said, "I see. There's no problem with granting a simple official position, however, I'll still have to discuss the specific details with the City Hall. After all, it's an official job." He patted the "old friend" on his shoulder and said, "I'll send someone to inform you after I decide."



# Chapter 514: The "Hypothesis of the Spirits"

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Nightingale appeared from behind him once Yorko left the study.

"Who are Mrs. Rother and Miss Kingfisher? What's the famous stunt?"

"Uh, this is a really tough question to answer." Roland walked towards the window and pretended to be contemplating, but he was actually preventing Nightingale from seeing his expression. "Just two ladies whom I was acquainted with. I don't know them very well, and I don't even know their real names. This is the way of interactions among the nobles. They're always hypocritical. Everything's simply for show most of the time and they forget all about it after that."

"But he said both of them are missing you dearly."

"Ahem... about that, they're not missing me, but my gold royals, status, and power. After all, I was still a prince back then. So they lost contact with me after I was assigned to Border Town. They would not be so cold to me if they really missed me, would they?"

Nightingale could only differentiate the truth of the statement, but she could not directly determine the truth of the matter. Thus, Roland decided to use the art of misleading and dispelled Nightingale's doubt with winding statements. Not to mention that he indeed had nothing to do with this nonsense, so he was not at all stressed about it. "Regarding the famous stunt... It's a little bit more complicated. Simply put, Yorko can make a woman fall for

him with the skills within his hands, as he is named the 'Magic Hand'. I used to be curious because I knew nothing about it, but I don't need any of these skills now, do I?"

He turned around and looked at Nightingale. However, she quickly avoided the eye contact, and a faint blush appeared on her cheeks. "I, I guess," she said.

"Phew... I should be safe now." Roland silently sighed in relief. Even though he could always ask Nightingale to wait outside in the beginning, it would not only hurt her trust but also put him in potential danger. After all, Sylvie was still inspecting the entire palace, and the gem list was still missing; it was better to be safe than sorry.

...

After dinner, Roland finally got to meet with Thunder, the great explorer from the Fjords.

His body was solidly wrapped up, with his head in a hood and a gauze wrapped around his neck. The guards would probably not have let them pass with the way he was dressed if Nightingale had not personally picked him and Margaret up.

Thunder took off his coat and gauze after creeping into the study. He respectfully bowed to Roland and said, "I've heard of your name from Margaret and Her Highness Tilly a while ago. My respected Roland Wimbledon, Your Majesty, thank you for taking care of Lightning."

"I'd like to thank you for taking care of Tilly as well," Roland excitedly answered, observing him from head to toe. "I heard that you've helped her a lot since she moved to Sleeping Island."

Thunder had the typical short blonde-colored hair of Fjords locals, just like Lightning. He was brown-skinned and had a stocky body, rugged-looking appearance, and thick sideburns that were conjoined with the stubbles covering half of his face and his chin. His tone was full of energy, and he clearly spent most of his time on the sea. He was completely different from when he first walked into the room without making even the slightest noise.

"Don't mention it. She was a great help to my adventures. If it wasn't for her help, I'm afraid that the fleet would have been limited to exploring the Shadow Islands." Thunder smiled and said, "And, of course, I wouldn't have been able to reach the sea that I've never seen before and witness the existence of Sealine."

"Sealine?" Roland curiously asked, "What's that?"

"A wall that's formed by the sea water that still allows the boats to cross over freely." Thunder narrated what he had seen in detail. "It's also what brings me here."

Roland was shocked to hear that sea water could overcome gravity and form into ladder-like height differences, allowing boats to sail vertically upwards and cross over smoothly. It sounded incredible! He felt a great wave of emotion in his heart; it would be difficult for him to believe any of these if he had not heard them

from the most famous explorer, Thunder.

It implied that the gravity here was distorted, forming a unique gravitational field. However, Roland was not able to make any conclusion at this time, as the principle of gravity formation was still unclear. Since magic power was everywhere in this world, he could only guess that perhaps magic causing the formation of Sealine.

However, he could faintly feel in his heart that the answer was more profound than he could imagine.

The planet looked very similar to Earth at a glance, so he quickly referred to the theories he learned as scientific enlightenment and guidance. This was not a surprise, since the existence of human beings and carbon-based organisms led to a rough judgement: The law of substances here was basically similar to the previous universe.

It was not metaphysics. The existence of life could be traced back to the speed and direction of atomic spin; it was so precise that none of the machines in the world could be compared. Any change in the constants would cause life to fall apart. Just like a wise man once said, "Life is just like a set of flush in hand, so it'll no longer be there once the cards are shuffled."

He even speculated that the past world might also contain magic, but it had never been discovered due to the lack of witches as terminals.

"I heard that you can make steam-powered boats without sails that are faster than any sailing ship," Thunder continued after Roland completely processed the news. "Therefore, I'd like to ask for your help to build such a ship for me, so that I can sail against the current and the sea wind. Money is not a problem. Please feel free to state your price."

Roland said after a while, "Regarding this matter, gold royals are indeed not a problem... No worries, I'll put the best technology into the ship construction and charge you only the cost of production."

"Your Majesty, no, you don't have to..."

"Listen. It's no longer your personal matter. Exploring the unknowns of the world is as significant as changing the fate of mankind," Roland interrupted and said. "I'll fully support your adventure with only one condition—remember to update me at once with any new discovery."

The discussion of the follow-up details continued for another half an hour. However, Thunder probably noticed that it was very difficult for Roland to settle down and concentrate, so he left after setting the next appointment time. Afterwards, Roland continued to sit in front of the desk, frowning and feeling unsettled.

"What's the matter?" Nightingale anxiously asked. "You look pale."

"Nothing..." Roland shook his head and sighed. "I just have a bad

feeling about this."

"What feelings?"

"Do you know about the spirits?"

"Uh, do you mean those tiny, glowing, heavenly individuals that could bring moisture and recovery to all things on earth in the epic biography?"

"No, I'm talking about the creatures with pointed ears and human-like bodies, who are elegant, long-lived, and generally prefer to live in the forest."

Nightingale contemplated for a moment and said, "I've never heard of them."

"I've only read about them in a storybook," Roland slowly explained. "These fictional species basically spread their footprints through the entire continent. However, they were forced to hide in the deep forest after the rise of mankind, putting them on the verge of extinction. As intelligent as they were, they were far less in number compared to the latecomers. Facing the Coalition of mankind that was a hundred times larger than they were, the spirits appeared to be totally defenseless, trapped themselves within the deserted mountains, and became increasingly outdated. Their technology was eventually taken over by mankind, and they ended up as pets... What do you think?"

He continued without waiting for Nightingale's answer, "We're just like the spirits now."

As a member of mankind himself, Roland had totally neglected this, but now he shuddered at that thought. Although mankind was indeed a thriving race comparing to the spirits, it did not mean that they would always thrive the most among the intelligent creatures. Nowadays, mankind was actually the minority, and they were at a disadvantage in terms of numbers. They were trapped by the demons in a corner of the continent and were totally oblivious to the outside world.

He decided to fully support Thunder in exploring the new maritime space for this reason as well. If mankind was not more foresighted and did not actively assess their situation within the world they were in, they could only be eliminated like the spirits.

"Both Battles of Divine Will wasted nearly a thousand years. Hopefully, it's not too late for all this," Roland thought to himself.

# Chapter 515: The Magic Painting

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"Good morning, Miss Soraya!"

As Soraya stepped into the bicycle factory, Jilly came up and said, "You're so early."

This made Soraya feel a bit embarrassed because she had stayed up late last night playing Fight the Landlord with Mystery Moon and Lily which made her wake up half an hour later than usual. When Wendy was not around, everyone became slightly lazy, of course... except for Anna and Agatha. Whether it was work or learning, they had always set a great example for the other sisters, especially Agatha. She always arrived early and stayed late.

Soraya asked Jilly, "Is the material ready?"

"Yes, please follow me," Jilly replied

As a student in the first graduating class, Jilly became Soraya's assistant after graduation. Her main job was to inform Soraya of her daily schedule. A year ago, Soraya would have never believed that ordinary people and witches could work together in harmony.

"Are those the finished bicycles?" Soraya asked since she suddenly noticed that the factory was a bit different today. The steam machine was not in operation and everyone stood around and stared at a row of brand-new vehicles.



"Yes, these are the first batch of products," Jilly said with a smile. "20 bicycles in total. It's not easy to make, especially the chains and wheels. The rate of the finished products was less than 50%." She finished.

"It's not easy indeed," Soraya thought. The factory was built last autumn, but since then, it had experienced all kinds of difficulties, such as the equipment not being ready, a serious shortage of human resources and so on... It was clearly less prioritized when compared to the steam assembly plant and chemical plant next door. Both of the neighboring plants operated in three shifts and people were working at all times. However, the bicycle factory only operated during the daytime. Once, even Jilly complained that her friend, who had worked for the chemical plant, had a salary three times more than hers, but she had never seen a single bicycle made.

Now Jilly finally obtained a bicycle of her own.

As Soraya walked into her office, she saw that the ground had already been paved with a layer of white paper that was about 40 square meters. The white paper made the floor look as if there was snow on the ground.

"Sorry to disturb you, the part we need to process today is the inner tire," Jilly explained to Soraya and then bowed.

"Okay," the witch nodded and said, "You may go on with your work."

"Well, please call me if you need any help." She laughed. "I'm just around the door."

Seeing Jilly leave excitedly, Soraya knew that she could not wait to ride the bicycle.

Soraya smiled and shook her head as she took off her shoes and stepped on the tiled paper floor.

Soraya usually painted the inner tires, outer tires and bicycle frames based on the demand of the bicycle factory. Soraya's painting speed was faster than the factory's production speed, so there were a lot of such things in stock. Given that magical powers grew every day, it was a waste not to use it, so Soraya came to the factory every three days to finish her painting tasks.

She recalled the color the inner tire should be painted and lifted her hand to summon the Magic Pen.

As a film material that contained gas, it must be light, soft and ductile enough and could be fused at high temperatures. From past experiences, she chose shaving coating method for it. After hundreds of tests, she found that sky coating was too flexible and ripple coating too thermal-resistant. When she was collecting raw materials, she noticed the wood shavings left by the carpenters and finally found the ideal painting materials.

Unlike Lucia, she was unable to break down materials into elementary substances and then mix them at any proportion. She had to understand the materials' characteristics by painting it out

and she was unable to remember thousands of materials and their properties. Therefore, the simplest way for her to remember was to make a color card. She would choose the appropriate coating from the color card when needed.

Of course, as the paint used for the inner and outer tires were common, Soraya was able to draw without referring to the color card.

The Magic Pen gradually widened to six meters as Soraya was standing at the center of the brush. Actually, the magic pen could expand at most to ten meters, but in that condition it could easily get out of control. So, she would rather spend more time drawing with a smaller brush to ensure the quality.

...

Within two hours, the 40 square meters of paper was coated with a layer of wood shavings. Of course, the paint was not real wood shavings. It was just like her steel painting was not real steel, but a material that was breakable like glass. A thing could never be extremely hard and extremely ductile at the same time.

Inside the wood shavings, Soraya engraved her name as a signature. This is a tradition among artists. Initially, Soraya signed at the lower right corner of the coating, but later, she found out that after the coating was cut, her name would only appear in one inner tube. So, she decided to sign everywhere. By doing so, no matter how the cutting was, people could always see "Soraya's work". At first, Soraya panicked when His Highness noticed it. She thought she would be punished, but instead, his Highness praised

her as a watermark inventor.

Although she did not understand the meaning of watermark, Soraya still felt happy for a few days after being praised by His Highness and decided to continue to sign her name on her work.

After the painting was completed, the next process was to burn the paper at one side of the coating to obtain the raw materials for the inner tire. It then would be sent to the cutting room to be cut into strips which would be welded into tires by hot iron. All these tasks were performed by dedicated workers, and Soraya just needed to prepare the raw materials for them.

The painting she made today almost consumed one third of her magic power and reminded her of the importance of training. Training would greatly upgrade her magical powers. In the past, this workload would make her exhausted, but now after she said goodbye to Jill, she still had energy and power to go to the North Slope Mine alone.

After entering the mountain, there was a sentry stationed almost every 100 meters as well as a bunker and watchtower set up at the entrance. Even the lord's castle was not so tightly guarded.

As Soraya entered the yard, the soldiers saluted her. She saw Anna thoroughly focused on cutting some strange parts as usual. At this sight, Soraya suddenly felt a bit ashamed of herself and at the same time felt some admiration for Anna who was so talented and still so hardworking. Anna was also the favorite witch of His Highness.

"Hey, Sister Soraya, you're here." Lucia announced and smiled as she heard Soraya's footsteps.

Anna also put down the parts in her hand and waved at her. "Please, here are some copper wires to be painted," Anna requested.

"No problem." Soraya smiled and walked towards them.

# Chapter 516: The Music of Recovery

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What Soraya did was to cover the cut copper wire with a layer of hard anti-corrosion coating so that it could be used for the City of Neverwinter's Three Supplies Project.

This process was easier than coating the inner wire, as the thickness did not require much accuracy.

After choosing the color card, Soraya turned the Magic Pen into a round tube. Once scanned from top to bottom, the "pigment" will become solid on the metal surface. It was a trick she learned from Anna—to make better use of magic power by changing its form.

However, there was still a big gap between them because Anna's ability to control magic was almost perfect. Soraya witnessed the Blackfire as it was cutting metal ingots. It seemed like a performance instead of a task... The three types of Blackfire were in different forms, and they cut through the metal from different angles, making a number of parts that were all the same size, or directly created a complete machine. It was easy to remember the characteristics of the black fire at different lengths. It was, however, hard to control the many types of it and make them work together while maintaining the different characteristics of their magic power. In order to do that, there should be no difference between magic power and limbs, and the magic power might need to be more flexible.

"Is it... a vine?" Lucia asked as she stared curiously at the colors painted by the Magic Pen.

"Exactly, this is a 10-year-old grapevine." Soraya explained, "It's hard and difficult to break, very close to His Highness' requirement."

"10 years old... Is that necessary?".

"Of course." She could not help laughing. "Young vines are obviously softer and less resistant to corrosion and heat. It's not just about their ages. Materials, such as wood, paper, and cloth have different properties in wet and dry conditions. That's why I need to use color cards to record them."

"If this is true, there'll be more color cards than metal formulas!" exclaimed Lucia.

"Not really," Soraya thought for a while and said, "'Elementary Chemistry' states that the characteristics of a material might undergo huge changes while its composition has subtle changes. But, the color card of wood has no noticeable changes when it's mixed with 10% or 15% water."

"Wow, you record the whole world with just a pen." Lucia was amazed. "This is really an enviable ability."

She smiled but did not answer. She was thinking of Anna, who really had an enviable ability. If the Magic Pen was recording the world, then the Blackfire was creating the world. Most of the changes in the town were related to Anna. Several of the machines at the corner of the courtyard displayed proof of that. As long as they were connected to the steam engine, they were able to

produce strong bursts of power. The workers became an add-on to the Blackfire through a machine. In a sense, Anna's creation enabled the ordinary people to have power close to the witches'.

Today's job was considered done after coating five bundles of copper wire—Soraya's working life was very consistent. She would go to different places to complete partial coatings every day. Since her painting speed had improved, only about half of her magic power would be exhausted by midday.

When a witch consumed all her magic power, she would feel tired or even faint. Therefore, they would usually retain 30% of their power during the daily training—Typically, as additional training to consume more magic power, she would continue to collect color cards and capture new colors. Still, Soraya became less productive because Wendy and His Highness were not around. For that reason, she decided to join Mystery Moon and others in Fight the Landlord game later.

She thought that this was definitely not slacking off. It was just a temporary entertainment.

...

Time always flew fast while playing a game. The whole afternoon passed within a wink. After dinner, Scroll announced some unexpected news.

"Today's evening course has been canceled and changed to Echo's ability test."



"Well, hasn't she done her ability test before?" Lily wondered and said, "Why does she have to do it again?"

"This is great," said Mystery Moon almost immediately while covering Lily's mouth with her hand. "I've never tested anyone else's abilities!"

Lily stared angrily at Mystery Moon till she stopped covering her mouth and muttered softly. "The point is the class has been dismissed. Why don't you feel happy...?"

"Teacher Scroll, what should we do?" asked Ring, the only non-witch in the hall.

"You just need to focus and listen," replied Scroll with a smile.

"I fancy not everyone needs to attend the test." Agatha stood up. "If not, I'll go back to my room."

"That won't do." Scroll shook her head. "You're one of the reasons for the test."

"Me?" She asked frowning.

All of the witches looked at Agatha, including Soraya.

"Yes. You're too stressed and your body won't be able to bear it if

you consume all your magic power every day."

"In Taquila, senior witches do the same," said Agatha carelessly, "Are you not aware of the brutality of the Battle of Divine Will? It'll never stop until the opponent collapses. I believe that the Union is willing to sacrifice all its members if they're able to find the path to victory."

"But His Highness said before, simply forcing yourself will reduce your efficiency. Resting is necessary for doing things, both studying and working," Scroll said softly. "I have told him your situation, so the test is an attempt."

"Test what?"

"The recovery skill of Echo."

The phrase surprised the witches. "Can she heal the wounded like Nana?"

Soraya doubted it. Echo's ability was to simulate all kinds of sounds. She was useless in the Witch Cooperation Association. She would not have been despised by Cara if she could heal others.

Scroll paused for a moment. "I don't know the exact reason. It's His Highness's idea." She looked outside. "Are you ready? Let's begin."

Echo walked to the hall and ascended the podium. She was a little

nervous. Everyone was holding their breath and waiting for her to exercise her ability.

The music rang softly, like a clear spring ringing in everyone's ears.

Then she sang a melodious song in her own voice instead of simulating one.

Suddenly, Soraya felt that everything around her had changed. The stone castle gradually faded into the darkness and her body was surrounded by warm springs... It was as if she were enveloped by a white mist, and upon her was a sky full of stars. The cool breezes blew through her warm body. She could not help humming out loud and was completely relaxed and immersed in this very comfortable spring.

At the end of the song, Soraya slowly opened her eyes after a long time. She understood the meaning of "Recovery" without any explanation. There was no increase in magic power, but the fatigue of the day was swept away. Her body became active and strong.

# Chapter 517: The Real Alchemy

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When Kyle Sichi returned home, he immediately saw a dark envelope on the dinner table.

"What's this?" He looked at his wife Cerra, who was busy at work in the kitchen.

"Oh, by the way, City Hall's officials came around this afternoon." His wife wiped her hands clean and placed an appetizing bowl of meat broth onto the table. "They said His Highness wants you to go to King's City, and a boat will come in two days to escort you there."

"Isn't he going there to confront his brother? Why would he want me there? What a complete waste of time," said Kyle with a frown. "It'll take at least a week's journey. His demands are really going too far."

"He's your prince, Lord of the City of Neverwinter, dear," said Cerra, shaking her head with a smile. "Also, City Hall's officials said that he wrote you a personal letter to show how important this trip was. That's quite an honor, isn't it? You should keep this letter safe after you finish reading it, so we can probably pass it on as a family heirloom."

"Family heirloom? If only it were the complete edition of 'Intermediate Chemistry'." Kyle curled his lip. "Let's discuss this

after dinner... He'd better have a good reason."

After his simple meal, he ducked into his study and opened the envelope.

A small strip of paper as long as a finger fell out. This was obviously a secret letter sent by a carrier pigeon, which was then placed in an envelope by the City Hall officials.

Kyle used one hand to press the paper and the other to fumble around the table for his monocle and placed it on the bridge of the nose. Due to reading over a long period of time under faint candlelight, his vision was getting worse day by day. Luckily, his life in the town has been improved a lot, and he could light five or six candles at a time in his office, but he did not know when his house could be installed with the kind of bright lights that lit up the chemical plant.

There was only one short sentence on the strip of paper:

"Do you still remember the Alchemist Workshop of King's City? Now it's your chance to show them what the real alchemy is."

Kyle gasped.

The Alchemist Workshop of King's City was the ultimate dream position for all aspiring alchemists who searched for the truth of all things, and he was no exception when young.

Only his wife knew that he had once applied to the Alchemist Workshop of the King's City. He had planned to gain admission using the "gold-dissolving liquid" that he had invented by himself at the age of 20. However, Kyle's formula unexpectedly failed during the review process, and he could not produce the smoking brown acid liquor even after two attempts. The reviewing alchemist Retnin was outraged and accused Kyle of intentionally wasting the Workshop's valuable ingredients. He denied Kyle a third try and even ordered the guards to seize his purse and kick him out.

Outside the Workshop, Retnin coldly tossed five silver royals from the purse to Kyle, saying that he should buy a trip back to Redwater City, while the rest of the purse was compensation for the Workshop's loss. He left as soon as he was done talking, leaving Kyle with only rejection and a great shame. This left a gaping scar in his heart, and he never told anyone about it except his wife.

Kyle returned to Redwater City full of rage, but he continued to pursue alchemy and spent all his time in his workshop, trying to find a new formula to prove the Alchemist Workshop of King's City wrong. Finally, after ten years, when he was 30 years old, he developed a second formula. For this reason, he was promoted as an alchemist in Redwater City. It took him another six years to become the chair.

Kyle had always viewed the Alchemist Workshop of King's City as his greatest enemy, and he interacted with them a couple times in his work, as well. But their alchemists were always extremely haughty and did not recognize any other alchemist organizations except their own. They believed that Redwater City's alchemists were only as good as their apprentices and students and did not

deserve the title of an alchemist. Their supposedly newfound alchemy formulas were mostly discovered by the Alchemist Workshop of King's City dozen years ago.

The Workshop chair even said other cities did not need to build alchemical workshops because this line of work required a great amount of money and manpower, which regular lords could not afford at all. If people needed the help of alchemists, they could seek it directly from King's City. If the lords invested tens of thousands of gold royals into their own workshops, they would probably make no progress with the end of a bunch of useless men.

Embarrassingly, Kyle knew that only the Alchemic Workshop of Redwater City saw the workshop of King's City as a competitor, but the latter did not care about him at all. He was overjoyed by his success in the double-stone acid-making method and the production of crystal glass because he could produce large amounts of valuable acid with the former, and the latter was the most highly demanded alchemic product on the market. Even the proud Alchemist Workshop could not ignore his two accomplishments.

In an unexpected and theatrical turn of events, Roland Wimbledon of Border Town found him and opened his eyes to a whole world of possibilities with "Elementary Chemistry".

From then on, Kyle realized that everything he had learned was meaningless. The alchemy itself was a backward practice and doomed for extinction, while a new path of exploration lay ahead of him—this time, the relationship between all things was no longer murky, but clear and organized. His past squabbles were also pointless, and he let go of his vendetta with the Alchemist

Workshop of King's City and the formulas that had taken him so much effort to develop.

It's reasonable to do so.

However, when His Highness mentioned this word again, Kyle Sichi's heart still raced, and an indescribable excitement crept back into his heart.

Kyle's mind recalled the cold figure, the muddy silver royals, the door that slammed shut, and the outrageous claim that there was no need for other alchemic workshops except the Alchemist Workshop of King's City to exist.

"Now it's your chance to show them what the real alchemy is."

Kyle scanned the strip of paper one last time, stood up, and walked out of his office. "Cerra..."

He paused in the middle of his sentence and noticed that his wife was bending over, packing his clothes into an open bag in the living room.

"What's this?"

"It's for your journey to King's City. I knew that even if His Highness didn't write you a letter, you'd still go," said Cerra with a smile. "Do you still remember the stories you told me? There are things that you're owed in that city."



Kyle stared at her blankly for a while and then burst out in laughter.

"Take good care of our home. I have to pay a visit to King's City."

# Chapter 518: The New Journey of Magic Hand

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It was a bright and sunny day in King's City, making it perfect for a sentencing day.

A cannon would sound on the square every hour, signaling that another formerly "prominent and important" figure received his deserved verdict.

Their convictions had actually already been decided, so this process was mostly used as a propaganda for the citizens. It especially condemned the church and Timothy for conspiring against the king and stealing the throne. After a week of preparation, the evidence collected against them proved their guilt without a doubt—of course, Roland did not actually give them a chance to argue for themselves.

Only a few of the nobles were sentenced to hanging. Besides Timothy, his henchmen, the Prime Minister, and judge, all the other sentenced men were the church believers. Even the church of King's City was completely uprooted, and Roland made sure that everyone who was involved in spreading the demonic plague got what they deserved.

These scumbags will surely be met by cheers from the audience when they're brought to the gallows.

"Are you not going to watch it in person?" asked Nightingale, standing by the window.

"Iron Axe and Theo will take care of everything," replied Roland without even raising his head. Public trials helped excite and unite the subjects in Border Town, but they would not have the same effect here. The people would not automatically side with Roland as soon as he killed Timothy, just like they did not side with Timothy after King Wimbledon III and Gerald died.

He did not have enough support among the citizens here.

He was also concerned about his own safety. Sylvie eventually found the gem list Roland remembered, which Timothy had hidden in a secret compartment in his closet. However, there were twelve more names than the gems there, four of which were hidden in King's City. It meant that they had all received Timothy's orders. Although they were not necessarily the assassination orders, Roland still kept his guard up. Execution grounds were too disorderly and unsuitable for him to visit, and he had no interest in watching executions.

He had much more important things to deal with.

For example, the army.

The casualties in capturing King's City were finally calculated, revealing that the First Army lost 33 men, which was their worst loss so far. Although they killed a much larger amount of enemies than that, Roland still noticed many flaws in their street battle tactics, especially in house demolition—most of the First Army's casualties were caused when enchanted soldiers surprised them by

leaping out from civilian houses. If his soldiers could use rifle grenades or blasting cartridges to demolish suspicious houses in their way, there would definitely be lighter casualties.

His other concern was the size of the army. The First Army could take on the entire Kingdom of Graycastle with its 3,000 men, but it was not enough to conquer everything in his sights. He would have to leave at least 500 men behind to maintain order in King's City, and after conquering Fallen Dragon Ridge and the Southernmost Region, the army would be too small to maintain a peace war. He needed to expand his army.

Roland wrote down the plans for death benefits and army expansion and handed them to his guards. He ordered them to take the plans back to the City of Neverwinter, where the City Hall would carry them out.

After that, the prince directed his attention to the lower-level nobles.

They did not have any substantial political power, but they were all well-educated and desperately wanted to be promoted. All the great nobles in King's City had already been cleared out. They were either exiled from the territory or sent to the Neverwinter mines, leaving many vacancies in the office. In order for King's City to run normally, the most effective tactic was to have these lower nobles work for him.

Barov had years of experience in King's City and definitely knew some of these men, so he would be in charge of organizing a temporary ruling system.

These men were willing to serve him, so giving them greater responsibilities would increase their eagerness. Yorko was Roland's first try.

Over the past few days, he finally decided where he should assign his "old friend".

...

Yorko shouted as soon as he entered Roland's office, "Oh God, you really killed all of the church scoundrels! I would never have guessed that they spread the demonic plague, and I couldn't even believe my ears when High Priest Ferry confessed to it. What a disgrace to the deities! Right now, the crowds on the square are praising your name and saying that you saved them six months ago."

Roland smiled. Theo had ordered the Rats to spread this news to corroborate the refugee camps from six months ago. It seemed that it was quite effective. However, Yorko probably made up the part about praising his name to flatter him.

He did not question his words and handed a delicate lambskin letter to Yorko.

"Take a look at this."

Yorko opened the letter, glanced at it, and widened his eyes.

"You're, you're making me the ambassador of the Kingdom of Graycastle?"

"Yes, and a permanent one," said Roland with a nod. "You'll have an official letter of appointment, scepter, and seal, and you'll reside in the City of Glow in the Kingdom of Dawn. What do you think?"

This position had taken a great amount of consideration—as the famed "Magic Hand" in King's City, Yorko had a bad reputation, just like Prince Roland did in the past.

No one wanted to be made a cuckold, including the nobles. While their wives cheated on them with other men, instead of simply catching them in the act, the husbands also meddled in brothels and bars—but it was all in secrecy.

If Yorko was given an important position, or if Roland openly gave the Magic Hand a job in the City Hall, it would have an unimaginable influence... All the nobles and merchants would be worried that their wives would begin to openly pursue Yorko, and the women that Yorko had slept with would all try to take advantage of him. Roland did not want this to happen.

His best option was to place him in a foreign country. Kingdom ambassadors were different from traveling emissary delegations, and they had similar authority as Earls, so even foreign kings treated them with respect. This was an important-sounding title that was perfect as a promotion. He also did not have to give him any land, and he would not worry any of the other noble.

Let him go bother the Kingdom of Dawn. I heard that their noblewomen are exotic and outstanding, so he might be able to make a new name for himself there.

Yoriko obviously also realized this point. He knelt down without any hesitation and replied excitedly, "I accept... my lord!" He was so eager as if he was worried that Roland would regret his decision.

"Then it's decided," said Roland with a smile. "Before you leave, I'll have a ceremonial officer to train you."

Besides Yoriko, he also needed to send some of his own men to the Kingdom of Dawn, so he could keep an eye on his neighbor and also form an alliance with them to fight the church.

# Chapter 519: The Secret within the Stars

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Roland shook his head with a smile as he watched Yorko excitedly bowed and left.

He did not mind helping the people who had helped Prince Roland in the past, as long as they did not have any bad intentions.

"Where's Wendy right now?" He turned around and asked Nightingale after taking care of this matter.

"She's probably on the top of the tower practicing her ability. Do you want me to summon her?"

"Yes, and get Sylvie, Lightning, and Maggie as well... we're going to visit the astrologers," said Roland. "And we'll be flying to them."

"I understand." Nightingale's eyes lit up.

"Even if someone wants to attack me, they can't pose a threat against a hydrogen balloon, so this is the best way to travel."

Roland had learned via carrier pigeon that Kyle was on his way, so he postponed his visit to the Alchemist Workshop. He was very curious about the Astrology Association, the other main academic organization in King's City.

Roland also had a great point of confusion that needed to be



confirmed.

...

The Astrology Association was located on a mountain in the northern area of the outer city, and it was only the second in height to the twin towers of the palace. The Astrology Hall had a pretty unique design and it looked like a hexagonal stone tower with a flat top from above. It had a wide base and narrow top, and its silhouette was precisely symmetrical.

Roland knew what symmetry implied in that era.

Without advanced measuring and positioning methods, it was nearly impossible to build such a large yet perfect stone structure, a process even more difficult than building a giant city wall.

The guards had left earlier and surrounded the stone tower. As the hydrogen balloon released the air and slowly landed on the tower roof, its passengers were immediately greeted by Brian, Sean and Alva Taber.

"Your Majesty, this area has been completely sealed, and I promise that not a single rat will escape!"

"We have also confiscated all the astrologers' God's Stones of Retaliation, allowing Miss Sylvie to use her magic power, so you can interact with them freely."

"Good job. Stay alert." Roland nodded in approval and shifted his sight to the row of men in gray robes standing behind the guards. They were all aged over 30 years old, and they kept peeking at the hydrogen balloon in panic. They were obviously still rattled by his sudden appearance from the sky.

Roland turned to Alva. "Who's in charge around here? Tell him to come see me."

"Yes, my lord!" Alva spoke briefly with two old men in robes, and one of them cautiously walked to Roland with him. "Your Majesty, this is King's City's Chief Astrologer, Astrologer of Dispersion Star."

"Your Majesty Roland Wimbledon, your honored presence makes all the stars shine brighter."

"Why don't you use your real name?" asked Roland, raising an eyebrow.

"It's a tradition of the Astrology Association," explained Alva hastily. "Every astrologer dreams of naming themselves after a star image... and only people who discover new star images are allowed such an honor."

"So you discovered... the Dispersion Star?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the old man with his hand on his chest. "It forms a Dispersion Star ring with three other Dark Stars, and it

represents death and rebirth."

"What about them?" Roland pointed at the other men in gray robes.

"These eight are star image masters of the Astrological Station, so they all made their own discoveries." Dispersion Star respectfully described them one by one. "They can explain the meaning behind anything from changes in the stars to dusk and dawn... of course, so can I."

"I'm not here to have my fortune explained."

The old man paused in shock. "Then... Your Majesty, may I ask why you're here?"

"I'm here to explore the stars." Roland shrugged. "Let's continue this conversation indoors. By the way, bring the diagrams of all the star images you've discovered. You have records for these, right? Mark the brightest stars and connect them with a thin line—yes, those things."

...

Stacks of parchment piled up on the table in the hall, some tinged with yellow due to their age.

Roland took a deep breath and used a pen to draw a "spoon" and "hourglass" on a piece of paper, and connecting the bright stars

with lines according to the stars diagram.

"Your Majesty, what're these?" asked the scholar confusedly.

"They're two star images." He picked up the paper and showed it to the group of astrologers. "Have you ever seen images like these before?"

They all shook their heads.

"Search for similar images in all of these parchments," ordered Roland. "Everyone, takes a pile, and be sure to look at every single one."

His great confusion was: "Am I on a different side of the same planet?"

It's not surprising that this place also has a sun and a moon. The sun is just a regular fixed star. There're billions of fixed stars in the Milky Way, and there're billions of galaxies like the Milky Way in the universe, so it's not unlikely that there's another fixed star system in the infinitely large universe.

However, I'm not sure about species' similarities. Biological evolution occurred by the coincidental outbreak, so there could be completely different organisms produced in the same environment. Whether it's demonic beasts or demons, I don't think they evolved from the same natural world as earth's."

He decided to use star images to address this confusion.

Fixed stars had life spans of billions of years, and their location barely ever changed, so they had always been used to determine the direction or hold symbolic meaning. Roland only remembered two star images: the commonly-known Big Dipper, and Orion. If he could find them among the constellations, he would be able to determine his location.

After an hour, no one had found the constellations.

Roland also used this time to ask Astrologer of Dispersion Star about a few of this world's most famous star images, but he had never heard of any of them. The Kingdom of Graycastle astrologers also did not know of the Zodiac star images.

In general, the Bright Stars on these star images were far denser than the star images he knew, which meant he was closer to the center of the galaxy. This was because fixed stars were closer together towards the galaxy's center.

Then it's very likely that I'm not on Earth.

This answer slightly disappointed Roland. He sighed and glanced around the hall. "How many members are there in the Astrology Association?"

"Your Majesty, there're 9 astrologers, 156 apprentices, and 67 handymen and masons," replied Astrologer of Dispersion Star.

"I plan to shut down the Astrological Station. Pack your bags and return to the City of Neverwinter with me."

The words instantly changed the expression on everyone's face. Alva said in a terrified tone, "Your Majesty, how, how could you..."

"I don't believe in astrology. I only believe in personal choice," said Roland nonchalantly. "And I'm the King of Graycastle, so I can shut this down if I wish to. You'll learn the truth about star images in the Western Region, and you won't see them as the meaningless pathways for fate anymore."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty Wimbledon, you can't do this." The Chief Astrologer slowly rose and said, "We have to watch the stars at all times without interruption—this order was passed by your ancestors."

# Chapter 520: The Star of Extinction

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"Ancestor?" Roland blurted out, "What the hell?" He noticed everyone staring at him astonished. Roland cleared his throat and said, "No, I mean... who knows if it's true."

Then he felt his left shoulder being gently pinched.

"Your Majesty, it's true, and I can prove it," the Chief lowered his head and said. "But you are the only one who can see it."

When the rest of the astrologers heard what the Chief said, they got up and left the room on their own. Roland thought for a moment and nodded to the witches and the guards, saying, "I'm fine. You guys go as well."

He would still have Nightingale with him as a last line of defense in case of any emergency.

The Chief Astrologer, Dispersion Star, entered a chamber next to the hall. After a long time, he returned to the long table with an iron box in his hands. He respectfully placed it in front of Roland.

"What's this?"

"It is the instruction left by your ancestor. He'd expected that this kind of thing would happen."

"You mean closing the Astrological Station?" Roland asked surprised.

"Yes, Your Majesty, and such a thing did happen before," the Chief said with a wry smile. "Although astrology and alchemy are both called the academics of sages, they are different. Alchemists can bring big profit to the kingdom while we have little output. Besides, the Astrology Association consumes many gold royals every year to purchase high-quality crystal and hire craftsmen. In order to prevent frugal future generations from dismissing the Astrology Association, your ancestor engraved the instruction and demanded that nobody interfere with it."

Roland opened the box. Unexpectedly, what he saw was a stack of gold sheets. It seemed that the Wimbledon Family had been willing to spend heavily on preserving this instruction.

He laid out the gold sheets on the table and counted. There were eight of them. Each one was about 3 millimeters thick and 2 palms wide, heavy in his hands.

What the Chief Astrologer said just now was engraved on the first sheet. "Nobody should interfere with the members of the Astrological Station in looking at the night sky, where lay mysteries which can show the fate of the world."

The latter part of the words caught Roland's attention and he became lost in thought.

In fact, this association itself was very strange. If the astrology



really worked, King Wimbledon III must not be replaced by the church without any preparation. Instead, he should kill the High Priest first. Just now even the Astrologer of Dispersion Star himself had mentioned the Astrological Station had 'little output'... that meant he did not regard the divination as a product. Now he seemed helpless, totally different from the first time Roland had met him when he had looked like a church scoundrel.

As for the ancestor who had expended considerable funds and manpower to establish such an association and engraved instruction on the gold sheet at all cost to deter post-generations from closing it (for it had no practical use), Roland did not believe that he was simply an astrophile keen on studying things outside of the planet while his kingdom was so underdeveloped. Obviously, the astrologers must hold a task that had nothing to do with divination, but was very likely related to the latter part of the sentence.

He checked the other gold sheets again and again, only to find records of the basic star observation methods and the history of the Astrology Association. The last sheet even recorded the principle of enlarging crystal lenses and referred to a supreme commander. It seemed that the ancestor of the Wimbledon Family had also been Chief Astrologer of this association at the time. Roland recalled the Wimbledon Family history but could not think of anything related to the description on this sheet.

He picked up the first sheet again, pointing to the latter part of the sentence. "What does this mean?"

"I don't know," the chief shook his head as he spoke.

Roland felt a pinch on his right shoulder before the Chief had barely finished his words.

He could not help chuckling, saying, "Listen, the man is more flexible than the rigid rule, and this order left by an ancestor was probably correct while he was alive, but the times have changed, and I don't want to be bound by this rule from hundreds of years ago. I'm the king of the Kingdom of Graycastle, and I can do what I want. Do you understand?"

"What? No, you -" The chief stared at Roland.

"You yourself know it clearly. You're only wasting money. You remain ignorant about the mysteries of the fate of the world. Besides, when my father was murdered by the church, you couldn't even give him a warning. Why should I keep you here to stare at the sky? You can't exchange the stars for gold royals. So, please pack up and come with me to the Western Region."

Hearing Roland's words, Dispersion Star, who already had an unfavorable opinion of Prince Roland, who had been intractable and unscrupulous in the King's City, suddenly looked dour.

After a long time, the chief said reluctantly, "You'll probably regret knowing this secret."

"How do I know if you don't tell me?" Roland smiled. It was really advantageous sometimes to intimidate others by pretending to be like the foppish Prince Roland. With these old men, this was the

only way to get an answer for it was impossible to ask Iron Axe to grill them.

"We've been undertaking a mission that lasts for hundreds of years. It began when the first lord Wimbledon arrived in this region." The Chief calmed down and said, "This secret can only be revealed to the successor of the royal family when he becomes King, and has reached the age of 30."

"Why?"

"Because your ancestor thought that the successors might be too confused and panic if they knew it ahead of time and lead to the decline of the Kingdom." He hesitated for a moment and confessed, "In fact, we're looking for the Star of Extinction."

"What's that?" Roland asked in surprise.

"A scarlet star, or the Bloody Moon. When it comes, the world will fall into a disaster beyond redemption."

The prince suddenly felt a shock and began to wonder. The coming of the Bloody Moon had been mentioned not only in the ancient book of the remains but also by Agatha of the Union. Why did a secular association also pay attention to this? Did the Astrology Association have inextricable links with the Union? "Please be specific!" Roland demanded.

"What I know is all from the former Chief," Dispersion Star said

in a deep voice. "It's said that there's a red star floating in the night sky. When it comes out like the crescent moon, the world will be destroyed. What we're going to do is to find it before it becomes a crescent moon. If its orbit can be found, we can predict the doomsday in advance. This is also the intention of the horoscope."

"Become a crescent moon?"

"Actually, it's natural that you don't know the star image," the chief explained. "The stars are always following a fixed path, such as the sun and the moon, and they appear at a fixed time. When they disappear, it doesn't mean they're gone. They just temporarily move to a position where we can't see. We call this path Orbit. In fact, most stars have an orbit of their own."

# Chapter 521: The Star Watcher

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Though most of the astrologers' findings were just common sense in the modern world, Roland still could not help being surprised by the fact that the astrologers could be able to tell the orbital motions of the stars without any modern observation techniques.

"The Star of Extinction also moves along a certain path," he said, "and it appears every 400 to 500 years. That means, it must orbit within a much larger area than the sun and the moon that are near us in space and can run a circle around us in a day and a night." He panted for breath and continued. "Given that an object appears big when it's near and small when far, the Star of Extinction in the sky will change from dark to bright and then turn into a crescent when it's getting closer and closer to us."

"Have you found it?"

Dispersion Star shook his head. "The secret mission has been passed down for hundreds of years but doesn't specify the exact time when the Star of Extinction will come. Maybe it's still in some distant position we can't observe."

"For decades... you've buried yourselves in this job?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The old man sounded very tired. "I became an apprentice in the Astrological Association 40 years ago. Since then, I've been watching the little changed starry sky every night. However, I had no idea of this secret mission until I became the Chief Astrologer. Besides observing the stars and recording the

time and seasons, astrologers also work as fortune tellers in festivals and celebrations, but we only say what the king orders us to, instead of truly predicting the future. It's a secret between the king and us. Astrologers need to be venerated as sages, in order for our association to recruit more apprentices."

"You regret it?"

Dispersion Star shook his head. "I would regret that ten years ago, but since I became the Chief Astrologer and received this secret mission from my predecessor, Meteorite Astrologer, I've understood what I'm doing is meaningful and it's really about astrology and foretelling the future. The significance of the job is beyond compare, but unfortunately, I don't have much time left."

Looking at his gray hairs, heavily wrinkled face and countless brown spots on his forehead, Roland had to agree with him and thought, "That's true. I'm afraid he can only survive for another two or three years."

"Is there any strategy left by your predecessors we can take to fight against or escape from the devastating disaster?"

"No, that's your problem, Your Majesty." Dispersion Star gave Roland a weak smile. "You're the one who leads the people to get through hard times. The Astrological Station is just your eye and will warn you about the coming disasters, thus increasing the chance of survival for the people. Given that, you can't close it."

The Chief Astrologer's attentiveness to his duty commanded

Roland's respect. For most people, it was hard to persevere with such a boring job, but this elderly man had searched for the Star of Extinction in the sky night after night for decades without flinching. Roland now guessed the reason why ancestors of the Wimbledon Family made the rule that the confidential information about the star should never be revealed to the new king before he turned 30. If young successors of the royal family knew about it, they would probably indulge themselves and do everything in their power to enjoy the rest of their lives.

After a long silence, Roland raised his last question. "What about Astrological Associations of the other three kingdoms'? They're searching for the Star of Extinction, too?"

"I've no idea... I've never left the King's City and they've never contacted us here in the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"I see, and that's all for today."

"You... decide not to close the Astrological Station?"

"No, let's keep it," Roland answered, stood up and then walked towards the hall outside. Before he left the room, he turned around to look at the Chief Astrologer and said, "I'll send you better equipment for observing stars and tell you about the real knowledge of star image."

"What?" The chief astrologer looked confused.

Without explaining anything to him, Roland continued. "Besides, even when the Bloody Moon comes, it's not our end." He paused a bit and spoke assertively, "We'll survive it."

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The hydrogen balloon was blown up. Roland and the witches got in the basket and flew towards the palace.

"What were you talking about?" Lightning asked, clutching the basket from outside.

"I want to know, too, coo!"

"It's a story about a man who left his work half done," Nightingale said and shrugged.

"In that condition, how could I insist on closing it now?" Roland rolled his eyes and described what had happened in the hall to them. "I planned to send them to the Western Region, but let them finish what they're doing now at the Astrological Station. They've remained loyal to their duties for decades."

"You're indeed a merciful king," Wendy said with a smile.

"Coo, a kind man!" Maggie flapped her wings and crowed, stretching her neck.



"Ahem." Roland quickly changed the subject. "The Star of Extinction they're searching for should be the Bloody Moon mentioned by Agatha. When it appears, the world is going to come to an end. This prophecy must have something to do with witches."

"I think so, too," Sylvie said after a thought, "and there's an obvious proof. This used to be called the Barbarian Land. There were only villages and no cities at all. How could the people here suddenly start to pursue something so impractical? It must be the survivors from the Union. When they came here to rebuild their homes, they brought the information about the Bloody Moon here and then passed the task on to the earliest astrologers."

"And one of them is His Majesty Roland's ancestor?" Lightning said, excited. "What a wonderful adventure!"

"An adventure? Where's the danger, coo?"

"You fool, not every adventure is dangerous. Finding out a secret is rewarding enough for an explorer."

"Coo? But you've said that an explorer should pay more attention to the experience than the results." Maggie blinked her eyes innocently.

"Uh... A great explorer can choose either to focus on the experience or to search for the results. That's how we make each exploration enjoyable." Lightning said in a low growl. "You're a long way from being an explorer!"

"Coo..." The pigeon gloomily fell on Roland's head. "Is that true?"

The witches burst into laughter.

After they went back to the palace, Roland immediately went through the records of the Wimbledon Family history he found and then could not help frowning.

"What happened?" asked Nightingale.

"There's no record about astrologers in the family history." He pointed at the yellowing page. "The first ancestor is Monde Wimbledon and the first king is Taraq Wimbledon. Nothing about the Astrological Station or the supreme commander... Their recordings were erased."

"Who did it?" She was surprised. "The writers of the book must be the kings in the past, right?"

"Yes, recordings written by each king will be added to the family history. Nothing should be left out," Roland said slowly, "and when the people started to build the cities here, he or she already had the ability to have the orders carved on metal sheets, but why are there no recordings about that person at all?"

Did someone try to conceal something? But why did that person leave a trail of clues in the Astrology Association? Every king or queen of the Wimbledon Family should know the real purpose of

the Astrological Station... What happened to the family 400 years ago?

# Chapter 522: A Drastic Change in the Northern Region

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"What?"

Calvin Kant, the Lord of the City of Evernight and Duke of the Northern Region shouted. He rose suddenly and stared at the messenger with disapproval, toppling his water cup from the side table. The cup hit the floor with a smash, making a crisp, clear sound.

"Your Grace, I saw it with my own eyes!" said the messenger, further lowering his head. "The rebel king breached the city wall of King's City in just one day. Even the king himself failed to escape. I'm afraid he's probably dead now."

"How... could this happen?" Calvin murmured. "It's King's City!"

Its blue stone city wall is more than 54 yards high and guarded by thousands of soldiers equipped with catapults and snow powder. No one can break through that city's defenses unless he has an army of 20 to 30 thousands. Even if Prince Roland had such a huge army, it's still hard to believe that he captured the city in merely one day!

"They had invincible firearms," the messenger said in a trembling voice possibly caused by tiredness from traveling the whole night

or the shock he had experienced in the battlefield. "They could fire without a break. Their weapons were just too powerful for the knights and even the crazed army of the king. No one could stop them. Anyone who got close to them died or was severely wounded... Compared to their firearms, the king's flintlocks were cheap, useless iron sticks."

Calvin's mind was a blank. His whole world was turned upside down. He felt it was all over.

He had received an order from Timothy, which had required that he should send an army to support King's City. As the new Duke of the Northern Region, he must follow the king's order and after some discussion, he had assembled an army of 2,500 by choosing soldiers from troops of the Horsehead Haws, the Snow Fox Lista and his own families. This army had been planning to set out after the snow melted and to arrive at the King's City two to three weeks after he had received the order. He had never thought that the army would miss the war in King's City as a siege warfare usually took months.

The army was mostly comprised of mercenary and freemen. Not many knights or serfs were in it, since the plowing season was about to start. However, no matter what kind of army he had sent out, he had already done something that the rebel king would consider guilty of rebellion. He was afraid that his good days were going to be over very soon.

"Edith!" Calvin suddenly thought of his brilliant daughter. "Maybe she can think of something to save us."

"Go! Bring my eldest daughter to my room!" he shouted to a guard by his side.

Edith soon walked into the study, wearing fitting clothes and carrying a training sword. Her hair was done up in a bun, and her nose was dotted with small beads of sweat. She had been practicing with her sword as usual and now seemed slightly displeased. "I've asked you not to disturb me when I'm practicing."

"I know I promised but we're in big trouble!" Calvin urgently repeated what the messenger had told him and asked her, "What should we do?"

He looked at his daughter, eager to hear a solution. Edith Kant, the brightest Pearl of the Northern Region, was not only a beauty but also a naturally talented politician and strategist. She had contributed greatly to the success of her father's rising from an Earl to the Duke of the Northern Region and even the sons of the Kant Family were overshadowed by her.

She was startled hearing that Prince Roland had conquered King's City in just a day but quickly recovered and said calmly, "Now you understand why I didn't agree to marry Timothy?"

Calvin stared in surprise and asked, "You knew that he would end up like this?" Timothy had stayed in the Northern Region after he defeated the rebellious Duke Ise and like many other men, had his eyes on the Pearl of the Northern Region. But she skillfully turned down the messenger he sent to her. Her father was confused and even blamed her for refusing the king since if she had married Timothy and become the queen as many girls had dreamed of, the

Kant Family's status would have been further secured.

"You mean his city was occupied in one day? No, I didn't expect that." Edith untied her hair band to let her long green hair down. "I just felt he was not the right person."

"Not the right person... Who is the right person is for you? Though his reign turned out to be quite short, he was still the king of the Kingdom of Graycastle at that time!" Calvin complained in his heart but did not tell his daughter what he thought. He had made his mind to pass his Duke title to Edith who he believed would bring a brighter future to the family, compared with her two brothers, if she refused to marry anyone.

"Anyway," Edith bent to pick up some broken pieces of the porcelain water cup. "First, you have to order the army to retreat."

"But they've been out for four days, and I've no idea which route they took. I'm afraid it's too late."

"That's not a problem," she arranged the broken pieces of the cup to represent the three locations and said. "You can send someone to Deepvalley Town today. If he sets out now from here, he'll arrive at the town by evening. Tomorrow, he can take a boat to King's City and reach it at least one day before the army. No matter which route the army took, they'll end up on the main road leading to the city's north gate, so if the one you send walks in the opposite direction to the army, he'll meet and stop them in the suburbs of King's City."

"I see." The Duke patted his head heavily and thought, "I should have thought of this solution. The news was just too sudden and astonishing for me to react calmly and quickly." He said, "I'll write a letter now! No, I'll send out a guard with my keepsake to deliver the command! Guard!"

A guard came to receive the order and then quickly left. Edith said slowly, "Father, do you think we can withstand Prince Roland's attack?"

A shiver went through Calvin. He knew that the outer wall of King's City, which had been twice as sturdy as that of his City of Evernight could not stand long in the suppression of Roland's powerful firearms. He replied, "I don't think we can."

"So, it's not enough just to withdraw the army." She shrugged and added, "Don't forget that it was Timothy who made you a Duke. It's natural for Prince Roland to consider us his enemies and it's just a matter of time for him to destroy us. Under such circumstances, we have to be more proactive."

You mean that I should swing to Prince Roland?" Calvin hesitated. "But why should he trust me?"

"Show your sincerity," Edith said softly. "Most nobles hearing the news will be intimidated by Prince Roland's overwhelming victory over Timothy and won't be able to fight in unison against him. Given that, we would have to surrender to him as early as possible. I'm sure I'm not the only one who thinks this way, so we have to show sincerity great enough to impress him."



"But... how?"

Before Calvin could work out what she meant, Edith drew out her wooden training sword and smashed two of the broken pieces of the water cup with a smile.

"I think the Haws Family and the Lista Family would make great presents. What do you think, father?"

# Chapter 523: The Blood Pearl

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In the evening, Calvin Kant summoned the nobles of the Northern Region to the castle.

The fireplace in the banquet room burned brightly with swaying flames, causing the guests' shadows on the walls to dance up and down as if they formed a very unusual painting.

Four long tables traversed the hall, each placed full of steaming hot meat dishes and wine. It appeared to be a highly sumptuous dinner, yet the atmosphere was not relaxed at all. This was even more so after the Duke announced that King's City had been seized.

"I've dispatched men to rescue the platoon that was sent out four days ago. Thankfully, they've returned alive," he declared in a deep voice while sitting on the host's seat. "But today, the question I want to ask you is... what should we do about the Northern Region?"

The nobles looked around the room blankly. Perhaps, the news that Timothy was defeated in a day was so astonishing that everyone in the hall was speechless and afraid to reply. Calvin could see the fear and regret in the eyes of the lower nobles. "Edith was right. We can't depend on these people to defend against Roland Wimbledon. Dividing the land was never an option from the beginning—there's only one path ahead."

However, for the nobles who had only recently sought refuge

with Timothy, it was rather embarrassing to openly turn around and switch allegiance.

"Why don't we send a spy to eavesdrop on Prince Roland?" Someone in the room suggested after a long period of silence.

"If he doesn't disturb the Northern Region, we may as well endorse him as the new king." These words immediately garnered the approval of another noble. "These are the Wimbledon Family's issues. It doesn't make a difference to us who becomes the king."

Upon hearing this, Earl of Lista laughed grimly. "No difference?"

Calvin frowned slightly and knew that the keynote was coming.

Indeed, after the Earl spoke, everyone in the room became silent, and this made Calvin feel a little uncomfortable. In reality, the three families were equal in strength, while the Kant Family was slightly inferior to the others. It was only because he had heeded his daughter's advice and was first to play up to Timothy that he was able to obtain the position of Duke.

Of course, he also understood that this was one of the new king's balancing tactics. Timothy was probably glad that the other two families belittled and were dissatisfied with him.

"Have you forgotten about Duke Ise? He was arrested for treason and executed." Lista asked the room callously. "He didn't actively provoke Timothy. If we admit defeat so early on, the noose may be

tied around our necks at any time, and it would then be too late to struggle! In Prince Roland's view, we've already participated in treason and none of us can deny our relations with Timothy!"

"What else can we do but admit defeat? If King's City couldn't even last a day, we would simply be throwing eggs at a rock..." One of Calvin's feudatories, who looked like he had lost his usual vigor, retorted softly, in accordance with the agreement. Under the incensed gaze of the Earl, he was unable to enunciate the latter half of his sentence.

"Even if we only have eggs, I'll try my best," Ed Howes proclaimed. "The rebel king murdered my elder brother! He has to pay for it!"

"It may not be us holding the eggs. The Northern Region's full of hills and mountains, and dangerous roads are all over. Roland's army may be able to travel quickly over plains and rivers, but it'll be a whole new game here." Earl Howes followed up swiftly. "At worst, the Horsehead Family will retreat to Coldwind Ridge, where I don't believe that his army will be able to reach."

"That's as good as baring your entire back to the church," Calvin silently thought. "Those f\*ckers don't harbor any good intention for the Northern Region either." He had heard about what happened to the eldest son of the Howes Family. "It appears that he died in a fight against the lord of the Western Region... but death is inevitable in any war. If shouting could injure or kill enemies, there won't be a need for weapons and armor."

The hall started to become rowdy. As the Lista and Howes

families stated their opinions, the voices which proposed to "halt the troops and get ready to fight the advancing enemy" gradually suppressed the ones which proposed to "actively pry on Prince Roland's position and express friendliness." Although Calvin remained silent throughout this discussion, he was beginning to feel quite anxious.

Surely Edith hasn't run into trouble?

"What does the Honorable Duke think?" His long silence had become suspicious, and Earl Lista was now staring straight at him.

Calvin's heart froze when he knew it was his turn to say something. "I brought all of you here tonight because I wanted to listen to everyone's opinion. This matter is important to the future of the Northern Region and we can't be too careful..."

Earl Howes interrupted him impatiently. "Enough! I've got a feeling that you've already planned to swear allegiance to Prince Roland. Why else would all those who expressed cowardly opinions happen to be your feudatories? If we're to hand over power meekly now, we'll just become lambs to the slaughter!"

"You..." Calvin felt an urge to toss his wine glass at the Earl but managed to refrain himself in time.

"Since that's the case, we have nothing else to discuss." Lista stood up and headed towards the banquet hall's exit. "By the way, if you want Prince Roland to spare your pathetic life, you may offer Edith, all tied up, to him. I've heard that he highly appreciates

beauty... ugh..."

The audience's laughter ceased as the Earl turned silent unexpectedly. A sword tip visibly protruded out of his back. The blood stains on the blade seemed to shimmer dimly under the light from the fireplace.

"Are you talking about me, Sir Snow Fox? I can't pretend that I didn't hear what you said."

The Earl's body collapsed onto the floor feebly. The tall and lean figure of an armored warrior appeared in front of everyone. She pulled her sword out nonchalantly, stepped over the Earl who was still squirming in utter pain, and walked into the hall.

It was none other than Edith Kant herself.

Calvin immediately felt a great sense of relief.

Her armor plates were stained full of blood, an evidence that she had just been in a violent fight. Even so, she was as composed and elegant as ever—she had the face of a beautiful smiling assassin. A platoon of warriors followed behind her and surrounded the hall in the blink of an eye. By now, everyone that was present understood what had happened.

"The guards!" Earl Howes' eyes widened as he spoke. "What have you done to the guards outside..."

"How can I deal with you lot if I hadn't disposed of them first?" Calvin exhaled a sigh of relief and smashed his glass on the floor. "You seem to have forgotten that I'm the one in charge here!"

He had long awaited this moment. This kind of banquet was held every once in a few days, and as such, most of the nobles did not take many precautions. They were each accompanied by less than 100 servants, most of whom they instructed to keep watch outside the castle area. It was the perfect opportunity to capture all of them together. After the guards had been taken care of, the rest was easy.

Of course, the person who planned and executed this trap was his daughter—the Pearl of the Northern Region, Edith.

As the exit doors of the banquet hall were slowly shut, the flames in the fireplace seemed to wobble for the last time.

The feudatories of the other two families pulled out their swords. By contrast, the lower nobles seemed shell-shocked.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ed Howes snapped angrily.

But Calvin had no time for a war of words. "If you put down your weapons and surrender, you'll be spared." All resistors will be killed!"

As the words left his tongue, two factions of people began to brawl.

# Chapter 524: A Night of Bloodshed

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Chaos and confusion erupted in the hall. Wooden tables were flipped, while bowls and dishes fell all over the floor, creating a symphony of clanking and cracking noises. Spilled soup flowed along the crevices in the stone slabs until it was everywhere.

It was the first time for the Duke's two sons to witness such a life-and-death fight from such a close distance. The older son, Cole, held out his sword and stood in a rigid posture to defend his father. It was completely unlike his carefree attitude during training sessions. Meanwhile, the younger son, 17-year-old Lance, cowered behind his chair.

Calvin sighed in silence. If he did not have Edith, his sons would probably not look so useless by comparison. The gulf of ability between her and them could not be bigger. Perhaps, they were already resigned to this fact and had long lost the courage and motivation to catch up with her.

The Duke looked towards the center of the banquet hall. His wunderkind eldest daughter already had her eyes fixed on Ed Howes, the strongest challenger around.

First, she took a bottle of ale and flung it at her opponent, forcing him to turn away. Next, she leaped up onto one of the long wooden tables and dived straight at him with her sword. Her quick and agile movements were like those of a cat. Ed adeptly parried her blows, and the clashing of swords caused sparks to fly.



She struck out half a dozen times within a split second, and her sword came together with Ed's to form a continuous clinking sound which seemed to signal the impending arrival of death. In this critical situation, Ed displayed frightening technique and strength to negate every one of her strikes. It was hard to pick a winner. While they fought around the long tables, many of the Howes Family's knights had already succumbed in battle. Yet, Ed did not flinch or cower but instead became increasingly aggressive.

Calvin began to worry.

As evident from the blood stains on her armor, Edith had earlier been involved in another tough fight. Even if she was not wounded, her physical strength had been expended considerably. Furthermore, as a female, she was naturally disadvantaged in terms of strength. It would be unfavorable to her if the tussle drags on.

However, there was not a trace of fear on Edith's face.

Her eyes were fully focused on her opponent—her bright pupils were like twinkling stars that could illuminate the world. Beads of sweat flung out of her hair ends with every strike she made. Although her energy was visibly diminishing, she continued to thrust relentlessly at her opponent, forcibly keeping him in a defensive stance.

Ed seemed to take notice of this. With a loud roar, he changed to a technique which would deal great injury to both of them. However, Edith was not keen on exchanging blood with blood, and became the one deflecting attacks. The disparity in strength

between them finally told. Edith lost her balance as her sword was sliced into two, causing her to fall off the long table.

The Duke's heart jumped into his throat. "F\*ck, help her now!"

However, even the nearest guard was not able to assist—everything happened too quickly.

Instead of attempting to stand up immediately, Edith astutely used the remainder of her sword to slice off the legs of the long table. At this moment, Ed jumped onto the table with both of his arms raised, intending to finish her off with a powerful blow. He completely did not notice what she had just done.

Calvin stared in disbelief at what followed. The table, missing a leg, caused the knight to lose his balance. If the table toppled normally, he would have been able to leap off easily. But just at that instant, all of his strength was concentrated in his arms, while his feet were fixed on top of the table, and his body was hunched forward in the chopping posture. As such, he fell headfirst onto the floor with a loud thud.

There was no chance of a comeback.

Edith jumped onto her opponent's back and pulled out a dagger from her waist. She plunged it straight into his neck and twisted it. The knight's body began to spasm.

"Was it... a matter of luck? Probably not..." the Duke realized that

Ed had fallen into his daughter's trap the moment he jumped onto the table. When Ed took over his opponent's high position, it made him feel as though he had turned defeat into victory. The advantage that he built up over the course of the fight caused him to think that strength and power alone would decide the outcome, and his confidence grew at the sight of his opponent's weakening resistance. This was why he placed all of his strength into his final blow. Under normal circumstances, Edith would not have been able to survive it.

But this turned out to be the perfect opportunity to trick him into losing his balance completely.

The resistance of the two families did not last very long in the face of opponents who outnumbered them by three to one. After less than 10 minutes, the hall quietened down again. The fireplace continued to burn calmly, while the only noticeable difference in the hall was the strong smell of blood that mixed together with the smell of spilled alcohol and other drinks.

The Duke returned to his seat and looked around the room. The lower nobles hurriedly lowered their heads and did not dare to look straight at him.

"Earl Lista and Earl Howes conspired against King Wimbledon and have been duly punished. Right now, you all have a choice. Do you all want to serve these two corpses or the new king?"

This time, the responses were uniform and there were no extra remarks.

...

"So, it's settled?" In the study, Calvin used a handkerchief to wipe off the blood stains on his daughter's forehead. "Will His Majesty Roland Wimbledon accept us?"

"You were calling him a rebel king only yesterday," Edith quipped teasingly. "Are you going to pledge homage to him so soon?"

"Wasn't this what you said?" The Duke glared at his daughter. "Since we can't beat him, we may as well surrender earlier. If we don't win his trust, the nobles will hate us too!"

In fact, the execution of the two great noblemen without going through due process violated the bottom line agreed among the noble. If it was not for the fact that the Kingdom of Graycastle had been at war for two years and the lords of various lands had changed rapidly, as well as Timothy being a bad example, Calvin would never have dared to do things as his daughter had suggested.

"I don't know if we can."

"Wh-what?" The Duke quivered and nearly dropped his handkerchief. "You don't know?"

"Indeed. All we can do is to display our sincerity, but ultimately it'll be Prince Roland who decides the fate of Northern Region. You

should know this, Dad," Edith said almost nonchalantly. "There's a chance he'll send his own people to take over Northern Region, and it won't be surprising if your rank is lowered. But I know that if we don't try, our Kant family won't have a chance to survive."

Calvin stood rooted for a long time before he sat back down, looking extremely displeased. He knew that his daughter was right, but yet he found it hard to accept her reply.

He did not want to lose the position of Duke.

Just then, Edith laughed. "Don't lose heart, Dad. You still have much work to do tomorrow. We'll seize the mansions and fiefs of the two Earls. Besides, the outcome of this matter will heavily depend on the level of competence we display to His Majesty." She paused for a while, before continuing. "Sincerity is our ticket into the negotiation, but ability is what will decide the outcome of the negotiation."

Calvin frowned in incomprehension. "What do you mean?"

"I'll bring these two heads to King's City, Dad." She laughed in a charming yet wicked way. "Let me be your messenger to His Majesty."

# Chapter 525: Return to King's City

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"King's City! After a year and a half, I'm finally back!"

Barov's heart stirred as he watched the cyan stone wall gradually become closer and clearer.

In fact, he had been excited ever since he received the prince's orders. Prince Roland had defeated Timothy smoothly and easily, as expected. This once again showed that no one was able to resist the army of Western Region's Lord.

Of course, it was now rather inappropriate to call Roland the "Lord of the Western Region".

He was now the only surviving son of King Wimbledon III, and thus was the bloodline inheritor and rightful heir of the royal family.

The obstacles to his ascent had been completely swept away.

It was a matter of time that Roland would be crowned king.

As for Barov, he would soon become the Prime Minister, second in power only to the king. This joyful thought made him become steeped in reverie. "When those 'old friends' of mine, who're so concerned about me, see that I've attained a position that they can't even dream about, how will they feel? Shocked? Jealous? Envious? Or gnashing their teeth while putting on a fake smile and

trying to please me?" These imaginations gave him immense pleasure. It would be even better if his former mentor, Treasurer Lauren Moore, could witness the scene of his promotion.

...

The concrete boat slowly docked at the pier in the outskirts of the city. Barov sauntered down the trestle bridge together with Kyle Sichi and other companions. Under the escort of the First Army, they walked through the familiar streets and entered the inner city palace.

The Palace of Twin Towers was still as majestic as it was in his memory. In the past, he could only look at it from far away in a small room in the City Hall. This time, he could walk into the palace boldly.

He was led straight up to the study, where he once again met Roland Wimbledon.

In a state of excitement, he got down on one knee and greeted, "Your Majesty, Kingdom of Graycastle is now yours!"

"Actually, not yet. Eastern Region and Northern Region remain under Timothy's control." Roland laughed. "Get up you, there's much for us to discuss."

To Barov, Roland looked and acted exactly like he did before. He spoke in his usual calm tone and was warm and friendly. He did

not seem to be affected by his upcoming coronation at all. Barov's attitude thus became even more respectful. He stood up slowly, dusted himself and replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Our prior task at the moment is to maintain the administration of King's City. I'd made this clear in the letter." Roland poured a cup of hot tea and placed it in front of Barov. "Do you have a preliminary plan?"

Barov hurriedly received the cup of tea. "It won't be difficult to maintain the existing order. Your Majesty, how about you let me handle the lower nobles? They'll know what's good and bad for them." Also, I've brought over 10 of my most outstanding students from Border Area. Some are proficient in business and some in tax administration. Even when I'm not around, my students will make sure that those noblemen don't steal or do anything funny." He paused before adding. "But, Your Majesty, I hope you'll assign the left-behind soldiers of the First Army to assist in their supervision. Without military force as insurance, supervision alone may not have the right effect."

Roland appeared a little surprised. "You don't wish to remain in King's City?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty," Barov replied without the slightest hesitation. "The government affairs of City of Neverwinter are much more complex and important. As such, I can't be away for too long. And it'd be too exhausting for you to go and handle these issues yourself." Please, Your Majesty, let me continue to manage the City Hall of City of Neverwinter for you. It has suited me well to serve under you."



Barov had thought very clearly about this. His Majesty had confirmed that City of Neverwinter would become the new capital of Kingdom of Graycastle, and therefore, it was only a matter of time that it overtook this city. At present, the former's population and development potential had already surpassed King's City, and after the launch of the new batch of recruitment programs, its scale would be unarguably greater than any other city within the Four Kingdoms. Of course, he would get to listen to the mourns and wails of his "old friends" if he remained in King's City, but over time, he would inevitably get bored and sick of them. Furthermore, such mourns and wails could not provide him with more authority and influence, and on the contrary, would gradually pull him away from the power center. He knew that it was only by appearing regularly in front of His Majesty Roland that he would be able to leave a strong impression.

Roland gleefully observed Barov for a long while until the latter lowered his head out of his guilty conscience. Then, Roland consented. "Alright. But my condition is that the change of city hall officials mustn't cause King's City to fall into disorder. You should know that every single person in this city is important to me."

...

Subsequently, His Majesty enquired about the details of the situation regarding the mining and farming projects in Longsong Area. He paid particular attention to the latter. Barov had known about Roland's preference beforehand and thus had obtained information about the farming projects from Petrov. He replied smoothly to every question, such that Roland continually nodded

in agreement.

The afternoon passed quickly. After asking his last question, Roland patted Barov on his shoulder to show his appreciation. "You've done well. I won't have to worry when I'm out leading the army into battle. Go and have dinner. We'll discuss the development plans of Longsong Area tomorrow."

"Yes..." Barov hesitated for a moment. He noticed that out of so many questions, Roland had not mentioned his coronation. "Your Majesty, may I know when you intend to be officially crowned and proclaimed King?"

"Plans haven't been made," Roland replied calmly.

"What?" The City Hall Director could not believe his own ears. "These things should be arranged as early as possible! With it, your prestige will increase tremendously, and the people's hearts will unite as one. There aren't any downsides. Why don't you..."

"It needs too much time." Roland cut him short, stood up, walked over to the window, and looked down at the magnificent city under the dusk light. "I've asked the ceremonial officer. He says that a full coronation will require many months of preparation. Aside from making the gold crown and the gem scepter, invitation letters have to be sent to the church and the other three kingdoms. The ceremony can only begin after all of their emissaries have arrived. Even if we omit the Holy City of Hermes, Kingdom of Everwinter and Kingdom of Wolfheart, it'll still require more than a month to contact Kingdom of Dawn. This will severely slow down our plans for the second half of the spring offensive."

"Your Majesty, you can simplify this process..."

"That would lower the prestige of the coronation, such that it might even have an adverse effect." Roland shrugged his shoulders in rejection of Barov's idea. "Even Timothy pays heed to this process. I can't appear to be more anxious and cheaper than him. However, my ambassador to Kingdom of Dawn will set off shortly. He'll notify them about this. When we get a formal reply from them, it won't be too late to consider this matter."

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After Barov took his leave, Roland could finally exhale a sigh of relief.

There was another reason that he had not mentioned. It was the deep and pervading notion of "Focus on amassing grains, while slowly becoming king", in other words, "Become rich silently". At present, he only occupied Western Region, which was not even a third of the land area that Timothy occupied when he was king. It was best to be modest before the church officially attacked Kingdom of Dawn, and it would be troublesome if Hermes made him the prior target. Though he was no longer afraid of falling out with the church, he did not want to draw aggro on behalf of others.

Shortly, Roland summoned Kyle Sichi to his study.

He was hoping that his Chief Alchemist had already thought of a

way to intimidate the Alchemist Workshop of King's City.

# Chapter 526: The Alchemist Workshop

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The Refining Hall located in the east of the city was Retnin's favorite place to stay.

It was a place always full of vitality, often filled with students and apprentices constantly moving materials back and forth. He could see steam rising from various vessels and perceive the smells of sulfur and acid water. Occasionally, he could hear crashes of broken glass, usually accompanied by loud scoldings from alchemists.

Even though he was promoted to one of the three chief alchemists two years ago and had his own alchemical room, he preferred the busy and crowded Refining Hall for inspiration. Just like the Refining Hall where people of different kinds gathered and mingled, alchemy was a process of mixing various matters. Nevertheless, only a few, such as crystal glass and snow powder, could distinguish themselves from the ordinary and shine through the muddy mixture.

The charm of alchemy lay in the refining process, in which those grayish white sand and black charcoals could turn into such a splendor that nobody had ever foreseen. The same held true for people. The Alchemist Workshop accepted a large number of new apprentices every year, but only a very few of them would eventually stand out from the rest and become first-rate alchemists. Retnin was one of the very few. It had taken him 34 years to go from apprentice to chief. Although he was now nearly 50, with one foot in the grave, he felt content with his life, for having learned the aesthetics passed down from the sages.

The only thing that disquieted him was the recent round of incidents in the King's City.

The biggest overturn was the change of the king. After Prince Roland hanged Timothy, he had indubitably become the successor of the King. The news should have had nothing to do with the Alchemist Workshop. They needed to be responsible for alchemical production whoever the king was. However, he was not sure if they could stay out of this trouble once Prince Roland found out they had provided Timothy with snow powder as a war material.

King's City had gradually restored its peace. Yet the fact that the prince had visited the Astrological Station instead of the Alchemist Workshop gave Retnin an ominous feeling.

"Are you still worried about the Astrology Association?" asked a voice at his side. "Its not like you to sit here in a daze, brows furrowed."

Judging from the unguarded tone, Retnin knew it must be another chief alchemist. He turned around and found Rayleigh, whose hair was as frosty as his, sitting next to him. "What on earth do you think His Highness is planning?"

"He's thinking those fellows who only care about stars are wasting money. What else can he be thinking about?" Rayleigh said carelessly. "It's a pity he didn't stick to his opinion. Those guys shouldn't be crowned as sages anyway. They should have been laid

off a long time ago."

As the two major academies in the Kingdom, the Alchemist Workshop hired spies to collect information about the Astrology Association. The Alchemist Workshop somewhat knew the purpose of Roland's visit to the Astrological Station, but did not know what exactly the chief astrologer had said to Prince Roland in secret that made him change his mind about shutting down the Astrological Station.

"Are you worried that the Alchemist Workshop will be shut down as well?" He patted Retnin on his shoulder heartily. "Don't forget the profit we bring to King's City! Once the limit in the production of crystal glass and perfume is lifted, the gold royals we'll earn can probably fill the prince's entire bedroom. How can he resist such a lucrative business opportunity and shut the Workshop down?"

"But we produced snow powder for Timothy."

"So what? Could we disobey the King's order?" Rayleigh grunted. "Any reasonable person should know it isn't us to blame. Besides, he also manufactured loads of weapons fueled by snow powder himself. I bet he must have gotten the formula from Boer, the traitor. In this light, we actually made a contribution to his victory. Perhaps he'll even reward us if we hand in the advanced formula."

"Hopefully." Retnin nodded, feeling a little relieved. Like Rayleigh had said, the Alchemist Workshop was the largest gold production organization. The prince might have been stuck in the middle of something and therefore failed to visit them right after

the war.

Just as Retnin was about to instruct a group of alchemists, a student dashed into the hall. Out of breath he shouted. "M-Mr. Chief Alchemist, His Majesty is here!"

"What? Where?"

Hearing Retnin's exclamation, everybody in the hall was silent, looking at the student.

"Above the yard in the air." The student swallowed hard. "His Majesty descended from the sky!"

Retnin and Rayleigh exchanged an astonished look. "Bring Chief Alchemist Archer here. Everybody else, follow me to greet His Majesty."

"Yes, sir!"

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A giant balloon that covered almost half of the sky was floating in the air outside the Alchemist Workshop. Soldiers armed with snow powder weapons surrounded the yard. After they had searched the Association thoroughly, making sure it was safe, the balloon started to land slowly.



"That must be the transportation device the prince used to visit the Astrological Station with the witches," Rayleigh whispered in Retnin's ear. "I didn't expect it could truly make a person fly."

"Anyway, he's here." Retnin felt alleviated. He grabbed Rayleigh's shoulder and said, "It doesn't matter how we address him in private, but you ought to show some respects in an official meeting. He is King of the Kingdom of Graycastle, even without an inauguration ceremony. Be serious."

"Don't worry. I know how to behave properly." Reyleigh assured him with a smile.

After the basket landed safely, a beaming gray-haired man came up to them under the protection of the guards. He was bareheaded, not splendidly dressed, and held no scepter in his hand. He was not as marvelous as he was rumored to be, yet the prince's every single gesture was majestic and dignified. Next to him stood an elderly man in a cope, who seemed surprisingly familiar to Retnin.

"Your Majesty, welcome to the Alchemist Workshop." The three chief alchemists bowed, followed by all the other alchemists.

Roland smiled. "My father used to talk about you often when I was still in King's City. He said both crystal glass and perfume are quite popular alchemical products, they have even been sold to the Fjord Islands. These products have brought great profits to the palace. So, I built an alchemical workshop myself after my father sent me to Border Town."

"Pft—" Rayleigh almost burst out laughing upon hearing these words, whereas Retnin restrained himself and managed to conceal his amusement. "That must not have been an easy business, Your Majesty. Every alchemical workshop requires a large amount of gold royals to operate."

"Really? But I didn't invest a lot of gold royals. You know how deficient the resources are in Border Town. At first, I could only do the experiments in a few wooden sheds. But now I'm able to produce various products, including glass and perfume." Roland continued casually, "So I'm wondering where those gold royals actually go."

"Your Majesty, what... what do you mean by that?" Retnin's heart sank.

"This is my Chief Alchemist, Mr. Kyle Sichi," Roland replied, pointing to the elderly man next to him. "He'll examine and evaluate your products. If there have been no innovations in recent years, I might as well shut down the Alchemist Workshop. After all, King's City was just ravaged by a war, and I believe tons of gold royals are needed for reconstruction."

The alchemists were outraged by the prince's comment.

"Your Majesty, I can't accept this!" Rayleigh was so angry that he couldn't bear it and stood to challenge him.

# Chapter 527: The Ultimate Goal of Alchemy

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"Huh?" Roland turned to him. "Why?"

"Well, Your Majesty... You're likely to be deceived by someone since you may not know alchemy well." Retnin interjected immediately. He knew Rayleigh took great pride in his work and sometimes even failed to pay due respects to Timothy. Certainly, he disdained the notorious Prince Roland. If Rayleigh accidentally enraged Roland, the rest of them would all have to suffer the King's wrath. "Alchemy is a process full of changes. Every formula represents a potential product. However, not all products are as dazzling as snow powder. They may not instantly bring you gold royals, but they can help with the production of another extraordinary product."

"Exactly." Rayleigh rejoined indignantly. "Take snow powder as an example. One of its ingredients, ice nitrite, is converted from feces. The conversion itself is a sort of reaction. However, ice nitrite can also be mixed with other products and turn into snow powder. All these reactions and conversions are the result of long-term exploration and research. Even an experienced alchemy master can't readily jump to the conclusion that one specific product is useless. Your Majesty, you can't evaluate our work simply with gold royals." Rayleigh stared at Roland's chief alchemist with deepened brows. "If someone promises you that every single product can instantly bring you profits, he must be lying!"

"What's your opinion on that?" Roland the man beside him.

The chief alchemist looked quite unperturbed. He stroked his whiskers and remained silent until nobody else was talking. "Your Majesty, they say this because they haven't probed into the nature of alchemy. I can prove to you that their formulas are all outdated. I already know whether their products are useful or not."

The alchemists all gasped at these words.

Retnin was speechless for quite a while. Did this man know what he was talking about? He'd just said he understood every single alchemy formula! What a terrible joke he was making! The Alchemist Workshop in King's City had discovered more than ten new formulas in the past two years, and it would take several days just to read them through. How could he say there was nothing new?" Retnin was stunned but at the same time he was secretly delighted. It proved Kyle was completely insane. And if there was a single formula he didn't know about, he would be accused of lying to the King!

Just then, Archer, the quietest chief alchemist, came forward. He asked sternly, "How do you want to prove it?"

"Very simple." Kyle strode toward the three chief alchemists. Confidently, he suggested, "Give me the ingredients and I'll tell you the formula. How does that sound?"

Rayleigh was so furious he was ready to burst. "Very good. There are all kinds of ingredients in the Workshop. Feel free to use them. If you name one formula wrong, His Majesty will know you've been lying!"

"What if I'm correct?"

"That's impossible!" Archer shook his head. "A few alchemy formulas can be repetitive, but there's absolutely no way formulas can exhaust. You take alchemy too lightly!"

Hearing this, Kyle suddenly had a strange look on his face, as if he were studying them with sympathy or other mixed feelings. "I'm not taking it lightly. The truth is that your perception of alchemy is mistaken."

Retnin could feel his temples throbbing. "What did you say?"

"May I ask what you think alchemy really is?" Kyle remained undisturbed. "Do you think it is chaotic, volatile and too complicated to study? No. You're wrong about alchemy all the way from the beginning—or rather you know nothing about the nature of matter."

"Nonsense!" Rayleigh hollered. "Are you implying that the theories passing down from sages are simple and straightforward? If so, why are there so many derivations and why is every single rock different from another?"

To Retnin's horror, a winning smile fluttered over Kyle's face. "Ah, yes. It's simple and straightforward, it is."

"What are you..."

"As to the reason why the world is diverse and manifold, it's beyond the scope of alchemy," Kyle explained placidly. "In other words, it's a higher realm that I just got a chance to set foot in."

"Enough." Retnin stopped Rayleigh who was about to explode. "Ask the students to prepare the materials. I'm sure all this monstrous absurdity will be refuted by facts later."

If he let Rayleigh keep going, the latter might raise his voice and lash out at Kyle, and perhaps even start to criticize Roland who employed him.

The man was indeed crazy to think that alchemy is simple and straightforward, Retnin thought bitterly. He would definitely teach Kyle a lesson afterwards.

...

A long table was arranged in the Refining Hall, with three vials and three pieces of paper on the top. Each piece of paper contained the names of the ingredients.

After a heated discussion, the three chief alchemists each selected a formula for Kyle Sichi to prove his theory. In order to show fairness, as well as to stop Kyle's blabbers, the three wrote all the ingredients' names down. However, it would not be their business as to whether Kyle recognized them.

When everything was ready, Retnin turned to Roland's chief alchemist and said, "You can start now."

Kyle paced to the table and glanced at the first piece of paper confidently.

"Burn the mixture of saltpeter and green alum?" He was surprised by what was written on the sheet. "It seems you've also learned the double-stone acid-making method. The products of the reaction are multiple solids and acids, and the latter can dissolve metals." He wrote a long list of symbols on the paper as he answered.

Archer, who wrote the question, suddenly was very embarrassed. "Correct." He pronounced the word with gritted teeth.

The spectating alchemists started to exchange whispers. They had probably never expected Kyle could give the right answer to the first question within a second.

"Silence!" Retnin bellowed. "There are two questions left!"

"It was pure luck." Rayleigh stamped about with indignity. "I don't think he can answer the second question that easily. What is he writing on that piece of paper by the way?"

Retnin shook his head. His heart sank rapidly. To both Retnin and Rayleigh's surprise, Kyle gave the answer to the second question a great deal of thought and even saw through the trickiness of Rayleigh's question. "Green vitriol acid and copper?"

The reaction won't start if the acid is in deficiency. With sufficient acid, the liquid will turn blue when heated, and it will bubble as well."

When it came to Retnin's question, Kyle did not linger either. "Just take out the Stone of the Netherworld?" He picked up the vial, shook it, and studied the white solid soaked in the water. "This is quite rare. It will burn on its own in the air and produce white smoke and white solids. Am I right?"

"Um..." Retnin was totally shocked. He had obtained this queer chemical substance from the alchemists in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Few people had seen it before, and even fewer people could name its properties!

"Please feel free to raise questions." Kyle turned around and glanced at the spectating alchemists. "I can prove to you that I'm not lying."

The words stirred up the audience.

"What will happen when burning the mixture of ocher and charcoals?"

"Ocher is essentially a kind of special iron ore. If the temperature is high enough, we'll be able to get iron from it."

"Why are the colors of glass obtained via smelting different? Didn't you say alchemy is invariable?"



"Because of the different impurities in it. We need the purest gravel to produce crystal glass."

"Sir Kyle, I have a question!"

"Me too!"

To Retnin's astonishment, the atmosphere in the hall was changing swiftly. The alchemists were gradually convinced by Kyle's extensive knowledge and naturally started to show some respect to him. It suddenly struck Retnin that the alchemists were slowly accepting Kyle.

"Shut up, all of you!" Rayleigh cried abruptly. "These are all old formulas the Alchemist Workshop has known for ages. If you really understand all formulas, then write a new one that nobody has ever discovered. For example, the ultimate goal of alchemy!"

"That'll be impossible," thought Retnin, who swallowed hard. He believed all the alchemists here thought such a goal was as unrealistic as a mysterious legend.

However, he was astounded to notice a smile lingering on Kyle's lips.

Kyle Sichi smiled to all the members of the Alchemist Workshop, who rested their eyes upon him. "Are you saying turning stones into gold? Of course, I can. Let me show you."

# Chapter 528: Turning Stone into Gold

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"Could it be that... you've extracted the Philosopher's Stone successfully?" Archer asked in a trembling voice.

The hall suddenly fell into pin-drop silence; it was perhaps an answer that everyone wanted to hear.

The Philosopher's Stone the culmination of alchemy and the rumors claimed that it had the ability to transform anything, which was the very reason why alchemy was called the art of philosophy. When used as a medium, it could transform a generic metal or lead into gold, creating unlimited wealth; it was also the origin of the term "turning stone into gold".

"A stone that can transform everything... it was simply an invention of the ancient alchemist who wanted to be lazy," Kyle waved a hand and said, "And, what I'm about to show you is the mystery of the world."

He pulled out a strange-looking pipe, which was made of crystal glass, from his bag and generously displayed it in front of the alchemists.

Everyone, including Retnin, was stretching their neck to take a peek at it. The pipe was as thick as two fingers and was sealed at both ends. It contained some matte-looking, brownish-red powder that looked just like some dried soil at first glance. It was hard to imagine how that powder had gotten inside.

Kyle asked for a glass of clean water before he picked up a green alum stone from the table and used it to smash one end of the pipe, shattering it into pieces.

This caused a stir among the crowd.

Even Retnin was feeling greatly distressed; the immaculate transparent color showed that the tube was obviously made from first-class crystal glass, which must have taken the craftsman a lot of effort to make into such a symmetrical shape. Yet, Kyle simply smashed it to pieces. However, he realized that Prince Roland was not lying when he claimed that the domain had developed crystal glass since the Alchemist Workshop of King's City would definitely not produce this type of strange vessel.

The water was quickly provided and Kyle poured the powder into the glass of water, and then the color of the water gradually turned into a yellow-green hue and the powder disappeared.

"Do you have any lead bars here?" he turned around and asked. "Give me two of the best quality."

"Hang on!" Rayleigh said, "Since it's an alchemic reaction, it shouldn't matter who does it. I've seen some street performers who're very good at covering-up; switching bronze royals into gold royals in front of a crowd... I'm not doubting you but it's better to be cautious on such an occasion." He looked at two of the other chiefs and said, "What do you think?"

"Indeed," Archer slowly answered.

Retnin hesitated. It was obvious that Rayleigh was doubtful and comparing Kyle to the street performers was indeed quite disrespectful. However, he had to support the Alchemist Workshop in this situation. "I... agree as well."

He was expecting the Chief Alchemist of Border Town to be furious. However, Kyle Sichi simply smiled and said, "Of course, there's no difference if the last step is carried out by either the alchemist or the apprentice. Just as I mentioned, the essence of alchemy is simple, orderly and straightforward. Who would like to do it?"

"I'll do it." Retnin was so excited that he did not dare look at Kyle, but he was not able to resist his curiosity towards learning the art of turning-stone-into-gold. "Can the glass of yellow-green liquid really transform the lead into gold?"

The apprentice quickly presented the materials—some green-and-white colored refined lead rods which were usually kept in a cotton-lined wooden box. They would be considered the best of the inventories. Retnin picked one up and carefully put it into the glass. To his surprise, he saw a golden tint appear on the surface of the lead bar!

He could feel his hands trembling uncontrollably.

"Look! It looks like something is growing out of it!"

"It's golden... Oh God, it's gold in color!"

"Is that gold?"

"It could be copper as well!"

The sounds of discussion behind Retnin grew louder. He turned around and realized that all of the alchemists and students were staring intently at the changes happening in the glass on the long table, with eyes wide open. They sounded surprised and unconvinced. All the while, Archer was looking lost and confused.

He was feeling the same at that moment... "Perhaps Kyle was right—alchemy is truly constant itself, completely simple and concise; and any self-assumed chaos is simply caused by making a wrong choice."

In that case, what's all of the decades of study for?

When the lead rod was lifted from the glass of water, there was already some filament blooming on the surface, resembling coral.

"These are all... copper!" Rayleigh was biting his lips and yelling with his last-ditch effort, "It's impossible for you to know the way to transform stone into gold!" It makes no sense! Otherwise, you'd have bought the entire Kingdom of Graycastle with gold royals, instead of simply becoming a Lord's Chief Alchemist of a small town!"

"I'm choosing this path, not for the gold royals but to understand

the world." Kyle's voice seemed to come from far away. "If you don't believe, you can always examine it... I think as the Chief of King's City, you would know the differences between copper and gold pretty well, so do you?"

However, there was no reversal to be incurred for a post-verification, a piece of the gold wire was sliced off and baked on a plate in the fire. It quickly melted indicating that it was gold. It was obviously not copper because copper would darken into an ugly solid mass under high temperature, while the flowing metal solution on the plate looked as bright and golden as the sun in the sky.

True gold fears no fire.

It was indeed real gold.

The hall already seethed with excitement!

"The alchemic formula for turning rock into gold does exist!"

"Lord Kyle, what were the symbols you wrote down on the paper just now?" Was that part of a higher-level formula?"

"Where exactly did you acquire all the knowledge from?"

"Lord Chief, do you still accept any student? I'm willing to start as an apprentice!"

Kyle Sichi extended his arms, intending to suppress the cheering noise. "Listen, everything you have seen today comes from a more ancient subject. It not only includes all the possible alchemy formulas but also discloses the mystery formed within the world! From it, you can even predict those alchemy formulas that have never been seen before, and turning stone into gold isn't an exception! I could teach you all this, as long as you follow me to the Western Region!"

"To the Western Region?" Retnin became stiff, looking at Roland Wimbledon, His Majesty, who was sitting off to the side with a smile... "Is that the true purpose of why they're here?" However, it was too late for him to realize how effective it would be. The enthusiasm on the scene had totally gone out of his control. Imagine that who wouldn't want to work for the association if he could master the art of turning stone into gold? Perhaps, none of the alchemists in the hall would stay, and the hundred-year-old Alchemist Workshop of King's City had unexpectedly crumbled within a day.

Retnin noticed that Kyle was slowly walking towards him.

"Do you still remember the apprentice who wanted to configure the molten gold solution 27 years ago?" He leaned forward and whispered, "After failing the test twice, you took away his money and banned him from ever passing through the door of the association... In fact, the failure was mainly caused by a lack of acid concentration, which should have been provided by you."

"You were the apprentice who was audited by me..." Retnin said

in shock—the pieces of memory in his mind were overlapping with the silhouette in front of him.

"That's right." Kyle nodded. "I'm just claiming what I deserve."



# Chapter 529: The Returned Witch

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Two days later, Kyle Sichi bade farewell to Roland.

"Don't you want to spend a couple more days in King's City?" Roland jokingly asked, "This is the center of Graycastle, the best place to have fun within the Kingdom. If you miss it now, it may not be here next time."

"I'm not you; I don't want to have an unfinished romance here." Kyle rolled his eyes and said, "There's still a lot of work to do in the laboratory and the plant. It's best for me to return to the City of Neverwinter if you want the production line of gunpowder to run smoothly."

His reply made Roland depressed. After the situation settled down, the atmosphere in the city was a little strange: First, many women claimed to be his lovers, followed then by their illegitimate children. Of course, he knew these were all rumors. Nevertheless, he could not stop the rumors from confounding the truth. Especially, when his history was so notorious. No matter how bizarre the stories were, they would still sound convincing to some... He could only get Theo to come forward and compel the Rats to eradicate the rumors.

"Alright." He was speechless for a while before he nodded and said, "I'll arrange a paddle steamer to send you back to the Western Region. Thank you for your hard work over the past few days."

"As long as you know it," Kyle said while shaking his beard. He left after paying respect by covering his chest with one hand.

"This guy's really ungrateful." Roland twitched his lips but didn't take it personally. He even started happily singing.

"You seem very happy surrounded by so many women," said a cold voice behind him.

"Ahem..." He was almost choked by his own saliva. "What're you talking about?! They were just trying to get some money out of me by saying that. I'm sure you know that."

"How, how would I know?" Nightingale said in a panic.

"Oh? You really don't know?" Roland retorted. "I thought you've investigated everyone here."

"... Okay," Nightingale revealed herself. She turned around and sat on the table. Staring down at him, she said, "I have indeed gone on an investigation. It was, however, because I was worried about your safety and afraid you'll let dangerous people into the palace. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said, trying not to laugh. But, the next words Nightingale said froze the smile on his face.

"Most of their statements were false. What about Miss Kingfisher and Mrs. Rother? They were not lying!"

"Damn Yorko, I didn't expect her to actually keep it in mind after the last cover-up." Roland silently cursed the "old friend" a million times. While staring seriously into her eyes, he said, "I didn't lie to you... The Prince Roland whom they were talking about wasn't me. You should be able to tell that I'm not lying."

Nightingale was feeling slightly uncomfortable being stared at and averted her eyes. "So, it's a misunderstanding? They thought it was you, but you weren't there? "

"Of course not," said Roland righteously. "In fact, I haven't seen them before!"

She looked slightly calmer and said, "So, you're just going to let the ladies who claim to have slept with you continue to make a scene? Theo said you didn't order them to shut up."

"Of course, it's exactly what they want—to be paid to shut up. It's too much to be violent, and it'll just increase the suspicion of the people." Roland was still unable to kill for this reason. "It'll be easier distracting people with bigger news than forcing those women to stop."

"Bigger... news?" Nightingale curiously asked.

"Yes, something they'll be discussing for weeks." He said smiling.

"For example, King's City is to be renamed the City of Dawn; the City of Neverwinter in the Western Region is to be the new capital of Graycastle, etc. The rumors will subside after I leave."

Of course, there was more news, such as that the king is not having a coronation, as well as the competitive plan for skilled craftsmen recruitment... Cumulatively, this news should be able to fill up the public's leisure time. Currently, the Rats were slowly spreading fragments of the news to the crowd. This followed the posting of the announcement of the City Hall in order to achieve the best publicity effect. It was expected these would be the topics of discussions in pubs for a long time.

"So, you weren't happily smiling because of them just now?"

"Not at all!" Roland patted the list of names on the table and said, "I was happy because of this." The chemical presentation led by Kyle was a huge success. The effect was better than he thought—there were more than 320 people from the association who were willing to move forward to the Western Region, including alchemists, students, and the apprentices. The final number was confirmed at around 500, including the family members. "That's the sum of employees in the five chemical laboratories and two plants in the Border Area. Now the number is doubled in a blink of an eye and most of them are the proficient who could be assigned to work after some slight training. It's the biggest accomplishment after we conquered King's City." He paused and said, "It's not, however, what I'm happiest about."

"What's the thing you're happiest about?" Nightingale asked curiously.

"Take a look at this." He spread the list, pointing out the names at the bottom.

"Retnin... Rayleigh... Archer, aren't they the Alchemist Workshop Chiefs?"

"That's right, Kyle didn't refuse them," Roland softly said. "He said he had already taken back what belonged to him." Roland thought Kyle would have a serious initial retaliation after learning about the argument between the Chief Alchemist and the Alchemist Workshop of King's City; without even meaning to continue the hatred, Kyle had received the consensus he deserved and accepted the three of them on behalf of the City of Neverwinter. It warmed Roland's heart to see there was still a group of people taking the right path in a tough time; the kingdom would definitely be continuously improving by having them in the realm.

Right then, a rhythmic knocking sound came from outside the window.

Nightingale flashed out of the window and came back to the table in the blink of an eye with the messenger in her arms. "A secret letter is here."

"You scared it." Roland shook his head. He didn't know whether he should laugh or cry while looking at the stunned gray falcon on the table. He quickly glanced through the content of the letter lifted and said, "Ah... it was sent by Scroll. I think we'll have to

leave as soon as possible."

"Is there anything wrong in City of Neverwinter?" Nightingale frowned.

"No..." he twitched his lips and said, "Lotus and Honey are coming back soon."

"The two little brats..." Somehow Nightingale sounded unhappy. "Do we really need to leave in such a rush? After all, there are only two of them. Lightning and Maggie can always go pick them up. They're much faster than the hydrogen balloon. They'll reach King's City within a day."

"We could definitely do that if it were just the two of them," Roland excitedly said. "However, the letter says Tilly's sending along new witches."

# Chapter 530: Lotus' Concerns

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The surface of the vast sea regained its former clear blue hue. The Charming Beauty sailed forward, riding the wind and waves. The hull moved up and down in the glittering waves, making rhythmic creaks.

"Set the sail full! Boys, move!" One-eyed Jack shouted, "We can make it to the Shallow Beach today."

The sailors on the mast were singing a work song together and pulling the three-finger thick hessian rope, releasing the sail bit by bit. With the ever-changing weather on the sea, they had to repeat such release and roll-up movements several times a day. Lotus watched the sailors, as flexible as monkeys, climbing back and forth over her head.

"So troublesome," the old captain walked towards the witches and said. "It would be so much easier if I had a boat such as those in Crescent Moon Bay, they can navigate without sails. What's the thing called again?"

"Paddle steamer," Lotus said, raising her eyebrows. "It was made by His Highness, Prince Roland himself."

"Why don't you ask His Highness to build one for you?" Honey asked, teasing the seabird on her shoulder, "His Highness may not do others such a favor, but he may do it for you."

"You little brat, you make it sound like I'm very close to him."

"Well, you're close to Lady Tilly," Honey stuck her tongue out and said, "and His Highness Roland is very kind to Lady Tilly."

Jack smoked his pipe heavily, feeling a pain in his chest. "... Never mind. I heard from those merchants that one paddle steamer costs more than 1,000 gold royals. That's the amount I'd never have even if I were to sell all of you."

"That's not for sure," Breeze said jokingly. "In Sleeping Spell, the reward for Lotus is counted by hundreds of gold royals. Besides, last time a merchant named Durat Kimshoe intended to employ her for a long term with 1,000 gold royals. That's only Lotus, so the four of us would be worth much more."

"Breeze!" Lotus punched Breeze angrily. "You knew what he was up to. I don't want to hear that man's name ever again!"

"Just kidding." Breeze held Lotus into her arms and said gently, "How could I ever sell you. When Lady Tilly heard about Kimshoe's proposal, she practically negotiated with the entire chamber of commerce of Crescent Moon Bay. After that no one would dare do such a thing anymore."

"You two seem to get along well." Jack spouted some smoke rings. "But the other two over there do not seem to have much to talk to you."

On hearing that, the three of them fell into silence for a moment. A while later, Breeze broke the silence. "They were witches from



the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

The old captain felt confused. "Aren't you all the same?"

"They support Heidi Morgan more than Lady Tilly."

"Morgan..." The captain stroked his chin and thought for a while. "Is she a noble in the Kingdom of Wolfheart?"

"Only from a branch." Breeze waved one hand. "Nothing serious. It's just we haven't been together for long, so we can't open our hearts to each other yet."

The old man seemed to have realized something, so he did not pose more questions.

Lotus did not know much about the nobles in the kingdom. She only knew witches from Sleeping Island were not as close as the witches in Border Town were. Among the witches in Border Town, most of them were from the Kingdom of Graycastle, and a small group of them were from the Kingdom of Dawn and the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Since Tilly was the organizer of the migration operation and had the noblest status, all of them, including the foreign witches, just regarded her as the leader. But after the church in Fjord Islands was eradicated, the situation had changed.

Lotus, who had returned to Sleeping Island after the Months of Demons, could clearly sense it. After only a few months' time, the witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart had moved in together,

and they seldom talked to other witches when they ate in the dining hall. According to Molly, they were all members of the Bloodfang Association, an organization similar to the Witch Cooperation Association of the Kingdom of Graycastle, with Heidi Morgan as its leader.

In the beginning, there were just over 20 witches from the Bloodfang Association on Sleeping Island. They were a minority on the island, which was nothing special. The extraordinary thing was that 18 of them were combat witches. In other words, the Bloodfang Association had carefully selected its members before the enrollment, and only those witches who were powerful could join in, which was totally different from the way the Witch Cooperation Association and Sleeping Island enrolled witches. Because of this, the Bloodfang Association was very competitive. When Tilly had carried out her eradication plan, the small group of witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart alone took care of the Twin Dragon Island cathedral which had the most believers.

And because of this, Heidi Morgan thought the Bloodfang Association was the core of Sleeping Island. Although Morgan did not express her opinion in words, Lotus could feel it. Lotus did not like the argument that combat witches had higher status than non-combat witches, and she agreed with Lady Tilly's idea of "witch equality". Unfortunately, not everyone shared her opinion. While Lady Tilly was away, Heidi had fought several times with Camilla Dary, Chief Butler of Sleeping Island. Luckily, Camilla, who was also a noble in King's City, did not appear dwarf in front of Heidi and calmly quieted the conflicts.

At this thought, Lotus sighed helplessly. She was not worried about Lady Tilly's safety. After all, Ashes, the most powerful witch

from Sleeping Island, was a faithful supporter to Lady Tilly. Ashes was the only Extraordinary who could fight wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation. In her presence, all the other witches from the Bloodfang Association would not stand a chance to win. What worried her was this trip. Honestly, she did not want to stay with the witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart.

And also, the witches being chosen for this trip were a weird combination—except for herself and Honey, two of the other three witches were combat witches. Normally, Lady Tilly should have known that His Highness Roland preferred assistance witches because those bizarre weapons he owned were enough to enable the commoners to defeat the Judgement Army of the church. To what end did she send the witches from the Bloodfang Association?

She racked her brain but failed to find an answer, so she decided to put these distracting thoughts aside.

Maybe Lady Tilly had her own concerns beyond her comprehension.

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As the sun moved to the west, the golden Shallow Beach shone in everybody's eyes.

At the same time, a hot air balloon appeared, floating in midair along with a strange, giant bird.

"Oh God! What's that?" The sailors on deck exclaimed when they saw the strange bird fold its wings and dive towards the Charming Beauty. As the bird drew closer, its sharp claws and bloody mouth became visible to the sailors.

"Is there an enemy?" Hearing the shouts, the Bloodfang Association witches rushed out of the cabin and were startled by the giant beast. "What's that monster?"

"Whatever it is, just catch it!" The other witch soon calmed down. "A target's size makes no difference to us."

"Wait a minute... That's not the enemy." Lotus hurried to stop them. "It flew alongside the hot air balloon."

A witch from the Bloodfang Association quickly glanced at her. "A hot air balloon?"

"It's a vessel that His Highness Roland uses to transport witches." Breeze stepped in front of them to stop their argument. "Relax. You can trust Lotus' judgement."

The horrible giant beast was getting closer and closer, making resounding roars. But Lotus could feel the roars were not for intimidation.

"Oh-oh-coo!"

The giant figure of the beast disappeared just as it was about to

hit the sail of the boat, and a white pigeon landed steadily on Lotus' head.

"You're here finally," Maggie rubbed her forehead and said.  
"Welcome back, coo!"

# Chapter 531: The Romance

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"Is this really okay?"

"What?"

"Sending Iffy, Softfeathers, and Lotus to Border Town," Ashes hugged Tilly from behind while Tilly sat at the desk, and said, "It must have been Heidi Morgan's idea, am I right?"

Ever since she had heard about the existence of the Sealine, Princess Tilly spent almost all her time in the study room. Stacked on her desk were piles of books, some of which were from Roland, and the others retrieved from the ruins. Seeing Tilly's figure behind all these books, Ashes felt sorry for her.

"Um." Putting down the quill, Tilly slowly leaned back. "Morgan didn't want me to have connections with the commoners all by myself, and I had no reason to refuse her."

"But the commoner is your elder brother. What makes her think she can choose for you?"

"Because she's also one of the royal members." Tilly shook her head, smiling. "The higher the status is, the looser the blood ties are. It's true in every kingdom." Heidi knew full well about it, and that was why she had made the decision.

"She intends to fight for His Highness Roland's support with you?" Ashes frowned...

"Not just yet. This time I think she only wants to probe the situation."

"Then why did you agree with her?!" Ashes loosened her arms and said with a low voice, "It seems like I need to talk to her."

It was Princess Tilly's affinity and leniency that won her the trust of the witches who used to be abused and suppressed by the church, and now they could bond together. But it didn't mean someone could regard her lenience as weakness, and test her on the basis of her trust...

Ashes was about to turn when Tilly grabbed her arm. "Why not? As I said, I had no reason to refuse her. Sleeping Island is our home. All the witches here are freewomen. I won't stop them from doing anything as long as they don't harm anyone. And..." She let out a sigh. "Sending them to the Western Region isn't a bad idea."

"Not a bad idea?" Ashes asked with bewilderment.

"Have you ever thought about why the witches at the Bloodfang Association were initially the same as other witches, but gradually became different?"

Ashes pondered for a while. "Because their lives became stable?"

"Exactly." Tilly nodded. "In the past, the church posed a heavy burden on their hearts. Everybody had to stick together in order to survive. But now the churches in the Fjord Islands have been eradicated and Sleeping Island has offered a relatively relaxing environment, so people think differently. This is quite normal. The Witch Cooperation Association is different. We're a compound group made of several witch organizations, so blindly suppressing them won't work. In order to let them cooperate like in the old times, we need a powerful enemy."

Ashes frowned and asked, "Do you mean... demons?"

"The enemies deep in the Fertile Plains, the fiasco of the Union, the upcoming third Battle of Divine Will... they can learn all these by themselves, which will be more effective than me telling them." Tilly smiled and said, "Besides, in Border Town, there're much more to be seen."

Princess Tilly stood up, and walked through the door towards the castle in the backyard and opened the door. "They'll see that non-combat witches can play irreplaceable roles, commoners can be as capable as witches, and they'll witness the amazing effects when everybody works together. Just like this door. When it's pushed open, a broader world can be seen."

Ashes quietly stared at this woman bathed in sunlight, and could not utter a word. Tilly's gray hair flew with the sea breeze, reflecting the shining light. She was astonishingly beautiful even viewed from behind. Time stood still. What was left in this narrow study was only her and Ashes.



After a long while, Tilly turned and smiled slyly. "I have some special reasons to have chosen Iffy and Softfeathers. This must be perceptible to Roland."

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Anna nudged Roland sleeping beside her.

"Time to get up."

"A moment." Roland turned over, cuddled her, and smelled her hair.

After returning to the City of Neverwinter from King's City, he had spent the whole night with Anna. The temporary separation had made their reunion particularly passionate. As a result, neither of them got out of bed the next morning. For the first time, Anna skipped her magic power practice, not because she did not want to, but because Roland would not let her leave.

Of course, she did not want to reject Roland's wooing either.

From noon to the dusk, their bedroom was filled with romantic atmosphere. When taking breaks, they just sat in bed and talked about the things that had happened in the two cities recently, and their lunch was brought to the bedroom by a maid. Of course, when the maid came, Anna sank her head into the quilt. Lowering his head, Roland could see a pair of sapphire-like eyes sparkling at

his chest area.

When he gently caressed Anna's back, she involuntarily moaned as lightly as a cat purring. After a year's growth, Anna was not the weak, thin girl he had met in prison a year prior. Now when curling up her body, she could perfectly embed into Roland's arms. When he kissed her earlobe from the back, he could see her cheeks gradually flush and her eyelashes tremble. It made her look very cute.

After a long while, she pushed Roland away once again.

"Wendy and the other girls will be coming back soon. This time there'll be new witches. You need to go wash up." Anna turned around and faced him with a serious look.

"Mmm." Roland briefly replied. He knew that he could not postpone anymore, so he kissed her lightly on the lips and rolled out of bed. First, he helped Anna get dressed, and then put on a coat for himself.

The basin of water on the table had already cooled down, but this was not a problem for Anna. A line of Blackfire shot into the water, and steam began to rise in the blink of an eye. After washing up, Roland sent Anna back to the bedroom and returned to his office on the third floor. At least he could make it look like he was working diligently, before the other witches came back.

Fifteen minutes later, Lightning and Maggie flew into his office through the French window.

"Your Majesty, they're here."

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"Who could have thought that you'd become the king of Graycastle in only a month." Breeze entered the castle hall first, followed by another four witches, among whom were Lotus and Honey. Roland was familiar with them, but he did not know the other two. "If Wendy hadn't told me, I really wouldn't have believed it. If Tilly finds out, she'll be very surprised."

Roland walked up to welcome them. "I haven't held an enthronement yet, so it's okay if you just address me with my old title."

"But you're indeed a deserved king," Breeze said, bowing.

Lotus and Honey imitated Breeze's move and bowed exaggeratedly, but yet the other two witches only greeted him by putting one hand on the chest. Two showed the joy of reunion, while the other two showed skepticism.

Roland felt surprised.

However, under these circumstances, he would not show his emotion. Making a gesture of inviting them, he said with a smile, "However, you had an arduous trip. Now enjoy tonight's feast. Make yourself comfortable. This is your home too."

# Chapter 532: A Tempting Idea

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After the banquet, Lotus and Wendy were called into Roland's office.

"Did everything on Sleeping Island go well?" he said to Lotus with a smile, "I hope I didn't bring you any trouble during Tilly's absence."

"Of course not." Lotus nodded and then whispered, "Oh... well, you gave me a scarf as a present last time, and I haven't thanked you yet."

"Don't be so formal." Roland waved his hand slightly. He knew that they would become less familiar with him after a period of time away, but this did not mean their personal relationship would be broken. Actually, this unfamiliarity was just temporary... He believed they would soon be able to be comfortable in this union again as long as he treated them as usual. "It seems that a lot has changed here, but it basically remained the same as when you left—please just make the City of Neverwinter your home."

"Yes." Wendy touched her head. "You're still our sisters."

"Okay." Lotus lowered her head in a show of embarrassment, however, she seemed to be more relaxed.

"After you arrived at the castle, I saw something weird... Aren't Iffy and Softfeathers witches from Sleeping Island?" Roland changed the topic because he had noticed that, whenever they discussed and talked about the old days, the two witches seemed alienated from others. Although they would speak now and then, they appeared to be less communicative than Sylvie, Evelyn, Candle and other witches who talked with each other joyfully. He did not know if it was just an illusion, but he felt that Evelyn and Candle feared these two witches a little.

"Yes, they did come from Sleeping Island, however, they're a little different..." Lotus briefly introduced their background. "I don't know why Lady Tilly sent witches from the Bloodfang Association here, either."

"Iffy is a combat witch?" Roland asked a little shocked.

"Yeah. She can summon a cage made from magic power and thereby capture more powerful enemies than herself. Even Ashes, if she's not wearing the God's Stone of Retaliation, would find it hard to get out of, once trapped.

"What about Softfeathers?" Wendy asked with curiosity.

"Although she is not a combat witch, she is also powerful," muttered Lotus. "Any object she is touching becomes sticky as long as she touches it, and they can't be separated once they're stuck together unless the magic power fails—but according to what she said, the stickiness can last for a long time as long as she uses enough magic power."

"This kind of ability could be widely used, right?" Roland was very surprised and exclaimed. "That's unbelievable! The Wolfheart Kingdom's witch, Heidi Morgan, agreed to send these powerful witches to us?"

"Well, the members of the Bloodfang Association are very powerful. They not only have many combat witches but the rest of the non-combat witches have superior abilities as well. They did a lot for the quick construction of Sleeping Island." Lotus sighed and appeared to be very reluctant to admit this. "However, they always feel they're superior to others, and often bully the witches with less abilities. The number of witches in the Fjords would have dropped by more than half if it wasn't for Lady Tilly's great efforts to stop them."

"So, this may be the reason why Evelyn and Candle looked afraid in front of them," he thought. "OK, I got it. Just have a good rest today." Roland comforted Lotus and then looked at Wendy, saying, "Well, please arrange for their accommodation and keep the witches of the Bloodfang Association away from them. I'll test their abilities in detail tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Wendy said while stroking her chest.

After the two witches left, Nightingale appeared beside him with a fillet in her mouth and asked, "Do we need to ask someone to keep an eye on them?"

"There won't be much of a problem since they still belong to

Sleeping Island." Roland shrugged and said. "The witches to the Fjords have never had to experience life and death together like the witches of the Witch Cooperation Association. They're blended with many other witch groups. In reality, it isn't strange for them to have such opinions." As the saying went, it was very odd for a party to form without any smaller factions. Things like this will also happen in the Witch Union sooner or later when it expands. However, the competition among factions also has its merits. Internal competition will make the Union become stronger as long as the competition is benign. I'm just puzzled about why Tilly sent combat witches here. If she just wants me to train them on behalf of her, she can also send assistant witches here, not to mention the fact that Breeze still stands by her."

"She probably clarified it in her letter." Nightingale guessed.

"Oh, you remind me of the letter." Roland patted his forehead and took the envelope from the drawer. He spread it out on the table. In addition to the five witches, Tilly also brought a stack of ancient books and a letter in her own handwriting. Due to the banquet, he had yet to check them.

In her letter, Tilly introduced the background of the ancient books and the odd parts of these books in detail. Then, she put forward her ideas about Sealine and hoped that Roland could help Thunder build a ship that could go against the current. Actually, Thunder had told Roland himself about the latter part. What Roland was shocked most was about the first half. He thought to himself, "The books are from different ages and places and they were collected and put into these remains. Some of the contents of these books had even disappeared for hundreds of years, which meant someone had come across the remains on the seafloor. Who

were these people?"

On the back of the letter was a brief introduction to the ability of the two new witches, and what Roland cared about most was the last paragraph at the end of the passage.

"What we know about this world is still vague and obscure, and our knowledge is not even as thorough as the Unions four hundred years ago. If we want to defeat our enemies, we should know about our enemies first—In this regard, their abilities could probably help us."

After reading the letter, he couldn't help but fall into his thoughts.

"Know about your enemies... offer help... what's Tilly trying to say?" He thought.

Roland read the introduction to their abilities again, and suddenly he came up with a shocking idea.

Does Tilly want...

"Oh, no, that would be insane," thought Roland. He shook his head quickly. However, once the idea had crossed his mind, it would not leave. "Though risks do exist, the reward would be very handsome. In fact, those boxes of magic stones left by Agatha are really tempting. If they are made into sigils, then they would be as significant as a steam engine..." Actually, he had thought about it



before, but it was very difficult to put into practice. So, he had to give it up. Now, with the help of Iffy and Breeze, he seemed to suddenly get closer to his goal.

"What does the letter say?" Noticing his strange look, Nightingale bent down and touched his forehead. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Not very good. I almost have a heart attack." Roland laughed helplessly. "Unfortunately, Tilly just left me to make the decision without any explanation."

"What kind of decision?" She asked curiously.

"To capture the demons," Roland said slowly, one word at a time.

# Chapter 533: An Unexpected Incident

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The next morning, Roland took the witches and other related personnel out of the city. They went to a place located in the North of the city wall near the Misty Forest to conduct a magic power test for Breeze, Iffy and Softfeathers.

Nightingale, Wendy, Carter and Iron Axe tagged along. The First Army sealed off the grasslands nearby and Leaf guarded the forest.

Softfeathers was the first to take the test.

She had long, brownish-red hair with bangs just nicely covering her eyebrows and looked as tall as Honey, who was at most 1.4 meters in height. Around the age of 16, she had already been awakened for four years, which was quite early among witches. It meant she had experienced the Demonic Torture four times. As a result, she had much more magic power than most of the young witches. The amount of her power was about half of the amount Anna possessed before her adulthood.

Softfeathers turned out to be very skillful in controlling her magic. She could turn an entire object into something very sticky or precisely make one side or a spot sticky. Softfeathers did this without consuming much of her power. Nightingale could hardly notice any changes in her power during the test.

"How long can this object stay sticky?" Roland asked.

"If I use all my power to make one stone adhere to another, it'll

last for decades," she answered and then further explained, "but I've never tried that. It's my own guess based on the consumption of my magic power."

"Then what's the biggest thing that you've applied your power to?" Roland asked

Softfeathers answered, "A seawall." A little satisfaction could be seen on her expressionless face when she was talking about her accomplishment. "During a high tide, there was an arm-thick crack in a section of the wall on Sleeping Island. As Lotus was not there, I immediately turned the crack sticky and filled it up with linen and pebbles to seal the break. Otherwise, the wall couldn't have sustained the shock of the waves." She finished.

Listening to her, Roland somehow felt that she was asking for praise.

"Great job," he said while nodding.

Softfeathers quickly turned calm after she was recognized. From her words and actions, it was hard to tell that she was an underage child. Unlike other children, she was used to concealing her feelings. "It may be caused by her past. What kind of life had the witches in the Bloodfang Association lived before they went to Sleeping Island?" Roland thought and sighed.

Breeze was the next to take the test.

She gave a graceful curtsy and said, "I've regretted for a while that I couldn't stay longer in the Western Region. I'm so happy to get this chance now to come here again. If you need my help, just let me know."

"To make up for it, you must fully enjoy your stay here in the City of Neverwinter. If you need anything, you can ask Wendy for help," Roland explained with a smile.

Breeze was about 25 years old, a little older than Nightingale. She brought comfort and happiness to the people around her, like a spring breeze. No one would guess she was actually a combat witch. Her power was called "field control". She could control the bodies of anyone within five meters.

Her ability was of no use when facing long-distance attacks, such as crossbow bolts and spear throwers. However, she remained almost invincible in any close combat.

As an ability of summoning type, it would also be affected by the God's Stone of Retaliation. She could summon the "field control" over 10 times a day and each time she would only use half of her magic power. While performing it, she would not be hindered from freely moving around either. The "field control" was invisible to naked eyes, which made it extremely hard for the enemies to defend themselves from her surprise attacks. Once she got within five meters of her enemies, she would have the full control of the situation.

Obviously, it was an excellent ability to observe demons in the short distance.

The last witch to take the test was Iffy.

She seemed to be around 20 years old, lean and fit, and wearing a tight black leather outfit with knee-high boots. Her waist-length, chestnut brown hair looked shiny in the sunlight.

Iffy did not know that Tilly chose her to come to the Western Region because she possessed an indispensable skill to capture demons with her "magic cage". In a blink of an eye, she could conjure up cages formed by her magic to capture the enemies close to her and squeeze the cages to crush them. Anything in her cage was weightless as well. This meant, even if she captured an elephant, she could also easily carry it back to the City of Neverwinter.

As the "magic cage" ability was crucial to the success of his plan, Roland carefully asked all the details about her ability, "What's the biggest thing we can capture?"

"Different sizes have different demands for my magical power," she answered. "But even a whale in the sea can't escape from my grasp."

"How many can you capture a time?" Roland continued.

"Two," she said and then spread her hands. "I only have two hands, Your Majesty."

Roland continued his enquiry, "Can anything escape?"

"No, even Ashes can't get out of it unless I release her," Iffy explained.

"Uh..." When Roland paused to think about other curiosities he wanted the answer, Iffy took an initiative to make a suggestion. "Why don't you find someone to test my ability? I think Maggie is a good choice. I've heard that she's evolved and can transform into a strong monster. If you witness that even something like her can't get out of my trap, you won't worry about my ability anymore."

Roland could not help but agree with her since the monster Maggie transformed into was just like the mount of demons, which the witches would probably encounter in their quest to capture them. After thinking for a while, Roland nodded at Nightingale and said, "Tell Leaf to call Maggie here."

Maggie and Lightning would fly over the Misty Forest when they were not on patrol. Guided by Leaf, they could both have fun and eat delicious food, such as picking tasty Bird Beak Mushrooms and taking eggs from birds' nests in the forest. Because of all the treats, when Maggie was turned into a pigeon, she now was as big as a bald eagle. However, when she transformed back into her real self, she was still a little girl with very long white hair.

Soon, they appeared in the sky.

Maggie landed on the prince's head as usual and said, "Maggie is here. Cool! What can I do for you?"

Roland briefly told her about the test and said, "Please turn yourself into a giant bird demon and try to break free from Iffy's magical cage."

"I see, Coo!"

Maggie flew up. She instantly changed into a huge bird and obscured the sun. Looking at her, Roland somehow felt her monstrous bird form now seemed much bigger in size than the initial one she had during her first evolvment.

"Let's begin," he said to Iffy.

Iffy sneered, with a flicker of contempt in her eyes. She opened her right hand, spreading all the five fingers. Meanwhile, a dozen of purple light beams immediately appeared over Maggie's head and swiftly formed a sphere, trapping Maggie Inside.

The "cage bars" were not very thick, but they were so stagnant that no matter how hard Maggie tried to bite or scratch them, she could not free herself. Iffy controlled the cage with great ease and seemed to be able to capture a demon with her left hand at the same time.

When Roland was about to tell her to stop the test, Iffy suddenly squeezed her right hand into a fist.

The cage instantly contracted to tie up Maggie tightly, making

her scream in pain.



# Chapter 534: The Value of Witches

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"What're you doing?!"

"Let her go!"

Hearing so many complaints, Iffy twitched her lips and raised her right hand. The cage was gone and Maggie fell onto the ground.

"Damn you!" A fast-flying golden figure lunged at Iffy. It was Lightning!

However, just as she raised her fist, the magic cage locked her inside. It was impossible for her to touch Iffy even though she was only an arm's length away.

"Get out of here. This is none of your business!"

Iffy angrily tossed the cage away, sending it tumbling over and over on the ground. Lightning bumped inside the cage until it rolled out of the area that Iffy could affect.

She wiped the dirt off her face and was about to bound towards Iffy again, when she saw Roland walking toward her, hand raised.

WHACK!

The sharp slap left everyone stunned, especially Iffy.

She did not bother to cover her red cheek, staring at Roland in disbelief. After a while, she slowly lowered herself on one knee and said, "Pardon me for my lack of manners, Your Majesty."

Roland was also surprised by himself. He had been reluctant to slap a girl, but seeing Maggie fall onto the ground, he had burst into anger and stepped forward uncontrollably as if witnessing his own daughter being bullied by some mean, naughty kid.

"Why did you do that?" He shouted at Iffy.

"Your Majesty, her potential will explode during a crisis, giving her much greater strength. I just want you to have accurate test results." Iffy said in a cold voice as if it was simply something trivial. "It seems that even an evolved non-combat witch still can't compete with a combat witch."

Roland was speechless in shock. What made Iffy think that it was reasonable to hurt her own kind just to get the test results? What kind of environment had she lived in?

He then turned and looked toward Wendy carrying the white-haired girl in her arms. "How's she doing?" he asked.

"She's alright. She's not heavily injured, except for some reddening welts and swelling," Wendy answered. She rolled up Maggie's sleeve with a frown, revealing red bruises on her white arm from the magic cage.

"Coo." Maggie buried her head into Wendy's arms, sounding rather grieved.

"Relax, Your Majesty," Iffy said plainly, "I'm always aware of how much power I use. Those areas of redness will recover within two days..."

"Apologize to her!" Roland angrily interrupted.

Iffy opened her mouth in surprise and blushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty"

"No, not me. Apologize to Maggie."

She bit her lip and lowered her head, without saying a word. Looking at Iffy who was insisting on not apologizing to Maggie, Roland felt so annoyed he wanted to laugh.

It looked like the situation on Sleeping Island was worse than he had imagined. If the Bloodfang Association witches dared to behave like this in the territory of a Lord, they must be even more arrogant on Sleeping Island.

Roland now found himself in an awkward situation. He could neither change Iffy's attitude towards non-combat witches, nor send her back to Sleeping Island. He believed that no matter how hard he punished Iffy, she would never see anything wrong with her own deeds and attitude. If he simply punished her and asked

her to go back, he would lose Tilly's trust because he would fail to solve the problem for Sleeping Island. He had promised Tilly that she could always count on him with any problem.

He would have to break her pride of her power, in order for her to realize her fault.

"You think you're more powerful than the non-combat witches, so you can despise them?" Roland asked in a cold, hard voice. "You're not that strong."

Hearing this, Iffy promptly looked up at him defiantly.

"You think combat witches are superior to assistant witches because you're the ones who can protect your kind, right?" Roland said, "This is ridiculous. You can't win a fight, entirely by yourself."

Iffy frowned tightly and looked angry. "Your Majesty, do you mean to say that a non-combat witch can defeat me?"

"Yes, you don't believe it?" Roland sneered. "Most witches in the Witch Union could easily defeat you, even if they've never used their power in a fight." He looked at Lightning who was standing aside, startled by his words at first. She quickly understood and nodded to him.

"That's just your imagination."

"OK, how about a duel between you and Maggie, " he said in a deep voice. "She'll show you why you should never look down upon the assistant witches."

"What?" Iffy's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean a fight between me and the dumb pigeon?"

"The duel is set for tomorrow, " Roland said each word slowly. "You'll see that you're not as strong as you think."

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Returning to their place, they saw lunch awaiting on the table in the living room.

There was meat soup, bread, mushrooms and stewed vegetables.

Apparently, they did not need to go to the hall for lunch.

"Wow? We get meat and bread?" Softfeathers asked in surprise. "I thought we would only get cold water."

"Is this for the duel? He doesn't want me to fight in hunger?" Iffy sneered. "He has too much faith in that stupid bird."

"Maybe the dishes are drugged with something, like laxatives." Softfeathers suggested.

Completely ignoring the other witch's words, Iffy grabbed a piece of bread and stuffed it into her mouth. "If you're worried about that, you can always just not eat it."

"I don't care. I'm not the one going to a duel." Softfeathers rolled her eyes. She climbed up to sit on a stool and took a dish of roasted mushrooms, saying, "Hey, do you have to do this? Lady Heidi asked us to confirm the situation here, but she never told you to irritate the lord."

"It's an exciting opportunity," Iffy said.

"Really?" Softfeathers asked with great interest. "That's why you're doing this?"

Iffy turned and stared at Softfeathers coldly until the little girl dropped her head and mumbled. "Fine, forget about it."

Ever since a group of Sleeping Island witches had come back from the Western Region, the atmosphere was bad for the Bloodfang Association. According to the returning witches, Lady Tilly's elder brother had built a domain where witches could live like ordinary people and even the assistant witches were well treated. This story had made the useless assistant witches on Sleeping Island very excited. Lady Heidi thought that it was Tilly who made up this story to gain the support of the many assistant witches. A lord would naturally value combat witches more, they could conquer and bring lands and power to him.

During today's test however, Iffy was really surprised to find that

this lord seemed to treat all the witches equally,

But it was not what surprised her the most.

She was most surprised by Maggie.

Iffy could not believe that a stupid bird so clumsy in speech was so popular among the witches and liked by the lord, and that everyone was really beaming with a smile when they saw the fool. On Sleeping Island, Maggie was just a pet, a dispensable role!

Seeing Maggie, Iffy was full of anger and jealousy.

Iffy thought it was a betrayal that Maggie had left Sleeping Island and was living happily together with the witches here.

This was the real reason Iffy had targeted Maggie.

However, things had really gotten out of her control.

She still found it hard to believe that His Majesty had made such a ridiculous suggestion and arranged a duel between her and a pigeon.

She had to accept it. After all, getting information about the Western Region was one of her tasks here. Another task was to attract the lord's attention by showing her value and ability.

She was confident that she could make it clear to His Majesty that there was a huge gap between the combat witches and the weak assistant witches.



# Chapter 535: The Gun of a Protector

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It was twilight when Roland returned to the castle with the duel affairs settled.

"Do you really think Maggie will win?" Nightingale appeared behind Roland the moment he stepped into the office.

"What're you worried about? You know that she's been learning marksmanship all this time from Lightning, your own apprentice!" consoled Roland. "She's brave enough, and she dared to fight with the demon in her beast personification at the critical juncture of Devil's Town exploration last time. The only thing to be concerned is whether she'll shoot at her peer."

Maggie would suffer more startle than pain, and Iffy was not doomed to death. Nevertheless, this disdainful attitude towards non-combat witches was no different from a bomb in the platoon. Until she learned this impressive lesson and repented thoroughly for her misdeeds, Roland did not dare to bring her out to catch the demons.

The most profound lesson would be Maggie defeating Iffy.

Undoubtedly, the gun was a weapon that could enhance the ability of assistant witches so that they could acquire more power for fighting. To avoid accidental death, Roland had deliberately had Soraya produce a batch of rubber bullets. The metal head had

been replaced with a multi-layer wrapped coating. This softened the bullet from interior to exterior and prevented it from entering a human body without weakening its full power. Its huge kinetic energy would be totally imposed on a human body as the bullet was gradually deformed, causing a pain severe enough to make the target lose any ability to defend. That was why it was also known as the Ability-losing Bullet.

"I want to see her." With discontent, Nightingale disappeared into the Mist.

Roland sighed gently as he clearly heard the crack of an arming gun from his side. He would have called for Nana if Iffy did not loosen Maggie as was expected.

It was rather obvious that Maggie dreaded the witches of the Bloodfang Association, which proved that they were used to doing such things on Sleeping Island. When considering Cara of the Witch Cooperation Association and then the inferior feelings Evelyn and Candle had when they had initially arrived, or even the Witch Union more than 400 years ago, there was no doubt that the idea of combat witches being nobler than others came naturally. In other words, the capable combat witches would certainly grasp more power when oppressed by foreign enemies. However, the force of gunpowder and firearms was strong enough to shorten the gap, Roland mused. Tilly might believe in him further if he could convert their thoughts.

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"You should remember there is nothing to be worried about and

you shall shoot directly at her until you empty the cartridge. You need to make her burst into tears and kneel down begging for mercy. Do you understand?" Lightning shouted in a high pitch, "Even if you were using normal bullets, Nana is here, ready for any accidents. Plus, there is the coating head made by Soraya. Only by shooting more bullets towards her, can you release yourself!"

"Hmm..." Maggie was leaning on the bed with her hair shielding her cheeks. "I understand."

"Not yet!" Lightning pushed her long, white hair aside and said, "You don't want to beat her, do you? If you show her any mercy, I'll never take you exploring. A coward can never be an explorer!"

Maggie looked to be struggling. "I'm not..."

"She's definitely not a coward." Another voice came from behind them. "A coward does not dare to fight with a demon. Not to mention, she saved my life."

Appearing from the Mist, Nightingale walked to the bedside and strongly struck Lightning in the forehead. "Who has taught you to speak this way!"

Lightning held her forehead and then curled her lip. "I'm just worried that she'll have cold feet."

After heaving a sigh, Nightingale took Maggie's hands in her own. "Listen, this isn't just about you and her. His Majesty has

made these arrangements with the purpose of making witches in the Bloodfang Association change their attitudes towards other witches and regret their mistakes. Remember Evelyn and Candle? There're many witches who had experiences similar to theirs on Sleeping Island. If you can teach Iffy a lesson, you're actually doing them a favor to some extent."

After a pause, Nightingale continued, "So, you're not just fighting for yourself. You're also fighting to protect us, just like what you did when fighting against the demon last time."

"En..." Maggie nodded gently, blinking her eyes.

"One more thing. His Majesty Roland also promises that if you win, the ice cream and pepper barbecue shall be supplied without limitation for one week, just for you."

"Coo!" Her eyes suddenly lit up.

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The next day, in addition to the guards responsible for site-clearing, there were more than ten witches standing on the grassland outside the city wall. They were centered around Roland, congruously making bright cheers for Maggie.

"I won't cheer for you." Yawned Softfeathers. "You can't hear it anyway."

"You don't need to do that." Iffy scoffed as she slowly walked to the divided central field and looked at Maggie without emotion. Maggie stood opposite her, capped by her long hair. If victory was judged by the number of supporters, the church would have already unified the whole continent. "It's not too late to give in. I trust you don't want to let His Majesty down."

"I'll never give in, cool!"

She was slightly stunned. Since when did this bird dare to speak so affirmatively in the face of her? "Really? Then get ready to fall from the sky into a cage like a dog!"

"You can't trap me," Maggie raised her head and said. "The only one who can catch me in the sky is Lightning!"

The moment the start whistle rang, Iffy went straight towards Maggie. She was sure that Maggie could not beat a person with combat training like herself, even though Maggie was helped by the power of God's Stone of Retaliation. His Majesty Roland had wrongly judged the fighting ability of combat witches. They relied not only on their power for fighting, they could also convert their body into a deadly weapon. By virtue of extraordinary physical fitness and restorability, witches could always withhold harsher training. She was confident that she could make her opponent throw in the towel in ten movements, even if it were a knight armed to the teeth.

With her wings rapidly spreading, Maggie changed into a bluebird and aimed skyward.

"Is this the stunt that you mentioned?" Iffy stretched out her arms in the direction Maggie had escaped. Her magic power did not reach anything. "This is a duel. Do you think you have anywhere to flee?"

"Chirp, chirp." Flying higher and higher, the bird soon faded away. Only a series of silvery tweets remained.

Frowning, Iffy looked to the sky and suddenly a faintly discernible shadow in the direction of the rising sun appeared within her sight.

"Is she going to give me an unexpected attack hiding under the sunlight?" Iffy could not help but sneer. This might have been a good idea, but even with her eyes covered she was still able to sense any object within ten steps by using her magic power—a derivative skill that had awakened at her adulthood.

Moreover, what harm could a fist-sized bluebird do to her? To win, her opponent would inevitably have to change into that ferocious monster again!

While waiting for Maggie to return, the earth suddenly darkened as a cloud shielded the light of sunshine. Iffy then saw a bird falling from the sky.

What a wretch! It looked like Maggie was not lucky at all!

She extended her hands without hesitation. The victory would soon be hers!

But there was nothing... In front of her was only magic power. She felt no sign of Maggie whom she had expected to rush forward.

Maggie had abruptly stopped moving when 20 steps away from Iffy!

To Iffy's surprise, Maggie recovered her human avatar in midair and pulled a short silvery stick from her pocket.

Was she mad?

Despite not having wings, Maggie did not drop directly to the ground. Her white hair had lifted and opened in a wing shape allowing her to descend slowly. Meanwhile, the stick spurted a ball of flame with a loud bang!

Iffy was clear that something had intruded the boundary of her magic power, but it could not have been Maggie, a crossbow, bolt or stone. It was not until she fetched out her cage that her belly was severely assaulted by something like a hammer, followed by her thighs and then calves. The loud sound rang continuously with the mud on the ground continually splashing. She could not make any sound due to intense pain and her seemingly broken feet were unable to support her body.

Iffy fell to the ground and clutched her stomach with her whole

body huddled up. Her consciousness was becoming blurry.

Dimly, she saw a white figure falling in front of her. With one last effort, she poised her hands, but the magic no longer responded to her summon.

"You lost, coo."

These were the last words she heard before she fainted.



# Chapter 536: The Dream (Part I)

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"Annie, I'm tired." Iffy complained.

"Hold on for a little longer. We're almost there," Annie said.

They were walking on hard gravel. Each step they took would cause a drilling pain in their feet. Iffy really wanted to stop but Annie was strongly pulling her forward and tightly clutching her hand. Annie did not even slightly slow down her pace no matter if they were crossing through the brambles and thorns or the ice cold stream. From behind, she looked as determined as a mountain.

"Annie, I'm really tired..."

Iffy begged again.

She felt as if her soles were on fire, her entire body was in unceasing pain, and her chest was feeling compressed no matter how hard she inhaled. She felt as if she was dying.

Annie softly sighed and leaned forward to listen to the ground, and she pointed at a raised stone not far away and said, "Let's take a rest over there."

The very last trace of strength rose from the bottom of Iffy's heart once she heard that it was time to take a rest. She clenched her teeth and quickly walked to the giant rock and collapsed there; she even wished to stay there for eternity at that moment.

Annie did not instantly sit down. She surrounded both sides of the rock with the broken branches that she found nearby for camouflage. It felt like a cozy nest with both of the branches and the natural ceiling-like tilted rock. Unfortunately, they were still on an uneven, rocky ground that hurt their butts and the small space was not big enough for both of them to lie down.

"The church won't find us since we've run this far."

"Don't let your guard down, and it's still not far enough from them."

Annie was as alert as a wildcat, always with her ears up, listening and monitoring everything around her. However, she was a lot tougher than the wildcat. She was accustomed to the pain and compared with the cruel Judgement Army, Annie was more like a silent predator.

"Does the Bloodfang Association... really exist?"

They were two of the five witches who were searching for the Bloodfang Association. After leaving Graystone Stronghold, they had been intercepted by the church, so they had decided to act separately. Iffy had been walking towards the east for three days and nights before bumping into Annie while the others were totally out of contact.

"Of course," Annie said while rubbing her toes. "I heard that they're on the Wolf Tooth Island across the sea."

"But, how could we cross the sea?"

"Just walk towards the shore and look for a boat." Annie comforted. "Don't worry, just leave it to me."

"Okay," Iffy softly answered.

Annie took a piece of dried pork skin out of the baggage and held it in her hands. Some white smoke instantly sprung out of it while it became boiling hot and soft as the cloud. "Let's eat first, we'll continue the journey after eating," Annie said.

That was Annie's ability, whose palms could set the branches and sticks on fire and cook the food as well. Iffy devoured the skin like a wolf and then drooled over the skin in Annie's hand. Annie smiled and threw half of hers to Iffy and said, "You eat more. I'm not very hungry yet."

It was time to continue their journey after Iffy finished eating the other half of the skin and licking each of her fingers.

Iffy was struggling to get back on her feet, but before she could get out of the cave, the branches around it suddenly started to tremble.

It was not the swaying motion of the autumn wind, but a series of light and fast-paced trembles, as if something was coming in their direction.

Annie's eyes instantly widened in fear and said, "Horses! They're approaching on horses! Run!"

Iffy felt as if she was being pulled up and started to run subconsciously. The drilling pain below her feet returned. As her body did not really recover, it was very difficult for her to even stand, not to mention running.

She turned around and saw more than ten galloping horses appeared at the end of the rocky beach. Their speed was not too fast which might be because the soldiers worried about hurting the hoofs of their mounts. However, it was still fast enough to catch both of them who were running on bare feet.

Iffy thought that they could not escape.

Or rather, she could not escape.

Iffy wrenched her hand away from Annie's grasp and said, "You go first."

"I'll carry you."

"You can't run fast enough that way!"

"Just listen to me. Be quick."

The Judgement Army on the giant horses was approaching when Iffy was hesitating. Iffy noticed that some had lifted their hand crossbows and thrown spears.

The bumpy gravel ground suddenly collapsed at that moment and the riders in the front fell into the pit, screaming. The platoon hurriedly spread out to avoid the trap, but the horses suddenly knelt down on the ground one by one. A group of red-dressed silhouettes unexpectedly popped out in front of the church soldiers as if they were rising from the ground. The mass shooting of the close range arrows caught the Judgement Army off guard, and the soldiers who were lucky enough to avoid the arrows could not escape and were hunted down in the ambush. More than 10 soldiers from the church were all lying dead on the stone beach within seconds.

After that, they quickly stripped the armors from the soldiers, taking away their dry food and baggage, along with the God's Stones of Retaliation.

One of them walked towards Iffy and Annie.

"Are you looking for the Bloodfang Association?"

"How do you know?" Iffy asked in surprise.

"Yes, my Lord," Annie quickly pinched Iffy's hand and said. "We're both witches. The other three of us were lost on the way. Could you please help them?"

"We don't have the manpower to attend to the other witches." The woman took off her hood and revealed her short fiery-red hair. "If your partners couldn't reach here by themselves, they're not qualified to join the Bloodfang Association." She paused and said, "Of course, not everyone who gets here can join the Bloodfang Association either."

Iffy could feel that Annie was holding her hand tighter.

"What're your abilities? Show me."

After seeing their abilities, the red-haired woman looked at Iffy and nodded. "You can go to the Archduke Island." And then she looked at Annie and said, "But you can't."

"Why?" Iffy asked.

"My Lord, I..." Annie said.

"I'll be sending you to another witch association, but not the Bloodfang Association." The red-haired woman interrupted Annie in a cold, hard voice. "You can't become a combat witch, and the Bloodfang Association doesn't need a cook."

...

"What're you crying for?" The red-haired woman impatiently reproached Iffy. "The Lord's going to be angry if she sees your crying face."

"I... want to be with Annie..."

"Hopeless little brat, she's nothing but a burden."

"She's not, she saved me!" Iffy swallowed her tears and said, "Annie is the true combat witch that you need..."

"Pfft... Whether you're a combat witch or not is determined by the ability you got in the awakening, not strong limbs," the red-haired woman said relentlessly. "You think that she's more powerful than you. That's because she's five or six years older than you. In fact, you have far more potential than she does."

"Where are you... going to send Annie?"

"It's none of your business."

Iffy felt like crying again.

The red-haired woman frowned and said, "Listen, the Lord doesn't like cowards. You can't mention about the past if you want to survive in Archduke Island."

...

## Chapter 537: The Dream (Part II)

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Deep inside the burrow, the crowd knelt down, worshipping a woman dressed in luxurious finery. Countless candles were silently burning, faintly glowing stars covering the ground.

"Is this the new kid? Lift your head and let me see your face."

Iffy lifted her head timidly, but could only see a mask reflecting cold light. She was almost screaming out loud at that moment.

"I'm Heidi Morgan. Don't be afraid, the mask was just to protect my identity." The woman's voice was softer than Iffy imagined. "You're a member of the Bloodfang Association from today onwards."

"Why... can't you accept Annie?" Iffy summoned up her courage to ask.

"Presumptuous!" The red-haired woman shouted.

The other witches were chuckling as if sneering at her stupidity.

"It's okay," Heidi said, waving her hand. She walked down from the stage to approach Iffy and said, "Because there's no way for me to support so many witches."

"She, she can find her own food."



"To live like a rat? Hide in the gutter all day and eat others' leftovers? Living that way will gradually make you more like a savage by the day," Heidi shook her head and said, "The Bloodfang Association needs beasts, not rats waiting to be slaughtered by others."

"B-beast?" Iffy could not help but repeat after her.

"Yes. Have you ever seen a cliff wolf?"

Iffy shook her head.

"They're the symbol of the Kingdom of Wolfheart and master of the mountains. They can give birth to three or four cubs every time, but not all the cubs can survive. Do you know why?" Heidi slowly explained. "Because the mother wolf will kill some cubs that she can't find enough food to support to make sure the rest of the cubs are well-fed. The future generation that was grown up in such circumstances could continue to live within the tough environment."

Iffy opened her mouth, but she did not know what to say.

"Cutting down the amount of feeding to each cub can also keep all the cubs alive. However, it's simply being alive—the young wolves without sufficient nutrition will not be able to hunt for themselves when they grow up. They would not be able to step out of the nest, neither would they have a chance to reproduce. The cliff wolf clan would completely vanish in the long run. What do

you think of that?"

"I..."

Heidi lifted Iffy's chin up with her finger. "My child, this is the inspiration the God sends to us: Witches must act like the beasts in order to survive in the oppression. And strong combat witches will naturally become the symbol of the entire race, for example... who you are now!"

The candlelight started to flicker. Iffy did not hear any cheering but she could feel their emotions. The combination of the emotions of excitement, inspiration, and joy was like the unspoken volcano.

After a while, she hesitantly asked, "What, what if there is sufficient food for every single wolf?"

"In that case, they're no longer the wolves," Heidi laughed and said, "but dogs".

...

The whip slashed on Iffy's back, making a crisp noise.

"Idiot, you can't even complete such a little practice, wasting all the food that was fed to you. Tell me, how many whips is this?"

"24" Iffy clenched her teeth and said.

She was responded to by continuous whips. Blood and sweat were flowing down from her back, drenching her pants.

"That's all for today. You'll get double flogging if the same happens for tomorrow's training." The red-haired woman threw a huge piece of rib into the middle of the four witches who were punished. "The dinner time is over. This is the extra food I asked Lord Heidi for. You divide it amongst yourselves. Remember, no magic power allowed."

The amount of the rib was enough to fill up four of their stomachs.

However, the fight training consumed a great amount of energy. The possibility to complete it would increase if they had extra food supply as supplement in between meals.

Like a beast...

Only strong witches can survive.

Iffy stared at the meat in front of her and pounced onto the witch nearest to her.

...

"The Secret Association was destroyed by the church. I heard that none of them escaped."

"Even the leader of the witches."

"The church is camping by the eastern coast!"

"The damned nobles." Heidi did not look well. "I'm going to tear them into pieces sooner or later!"

The influence of witches within the Kingdom of Wolfheart was eliminated one by one, leaving only the Bloodfang Association to barely support itself. Although Iffy did not quite understand why it was related to the nobles on the island, she could sense that the situation was getting critical.

"In this case, send Shaji and me to get rid of them." Iffy suggested.

"It's too late! The church has noticed the Archduke Island. We can no longer stay here," Heidi clenched her teeth and said. "Let's go to Sleeping Island."

"You're talking about... the witch association which sent the pigeon to deliver the letter last time?" Iffy asked.

"Exactly. We can draw some manpower from there to strengthen ourselves. It's only temporary; I'll be back here sooner or later! The Kingdom of Wolfheart is mine!"

...

"Damn. Why are these people willing to listen to the orders from a little girl?" Heidi angrily threw the glass onto the ground.

Iffy was speechless. The witches on Sleeping Island were like sheep in her eyes, as they did not have much power of resistance when they were facing enemies, including the so-called leader, Tilly Wimbledon. Without the Extraordinary beside her, she would not be able to hold the position.

"It's probably because she's preaching the equal importance of non-combat witches?" Shaji interrupted. "No one wants to be excluded."

"Ridiculous! She didn't even think about who defeated the church in Fjords! Who'll believe such a nonsense?"

"Tilly's elder brother, Lord of the Western Region seems to agree with that."

"That was all made up by them! No one knows what a lord really wants better than I do!" Heidi angrily said. "You thought that I built the Bloodfang Association for..." she suddenly stopped for a while and then continued, "No, I can't allow them to continue talking nonsense. You have to go to the Western Region and expose Tilly's lies! Bring my words to the lord. I can offer double for what Tilly Wimbledon has to offer!"

Somehow, Iffy felt that Lord Heidi at the moment was nowhere like a beast but an exasperated lamb.

"That's why you abandoned me?"

Annie's figure suddenly appeared in front of her. "You left me for this kind of master and such a ridiculous life, betraying my trust towards you?"

"No, Annie..."

Iffy was horrified to notice the blank space on Annie's face.

"Do you... forget about me?"

She quickly opened her eyes and everything that had been in front of her eyes just now suddenly disappeared, leaving the gray-white colored ceiling of the room and the hanging light.

Is this a dream?

She quickly closed her eyes again to recall Annie's face. Fortunately, Iffy still clearly remembered her look.

Iffy turned around and sat up on her bed, feeling slightly relieved. However, she saw a little girl curiously looking at her by the bed.

Iffy could tell from her eyes that she must be someone who had not experienced any suffers and struggles... someone who was also called the sheep.

"Who're you?"

"Nana," the little girl tilted her head and said. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Iffy could feel that her back was drenched in her sweat at that moment. "Did I... say anything?"

"Oh, yes. You kept mumbling that 'I'm a beast... I'm a beast...'," the little girl said with her arms open, "Why did you say that? You're not a beast."

She bit her lips and said, "You... have no idea."

"I have," Nana said, while covering her grin with her hand. "You're just like me. Aren't we both human beings?"

# Chapter 538: The Wheel of Time

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After being supplied with food and equipment, the First Army was ready to set out once again.

This was the mission for the latter half of the spring offensive: seizing Willow Town and Fallen Dragon Ridge. Capturing Willow Town would unify the Western Region, and taking control of Fallen Dragon Ridge would enable them to have the easiest access to the Southern Territory.

Since these two towns were well fortified, Roland entrusted the command to Iron Axe and he himself would not partake in the expedition. Because they just conquered King's City, the soldiers were having high morale. Besides, those professional soldiers had gradually formed a prototype of soldiers in a modern army, which meant they could faithfully carry out combat orders without being led by Roland personally. Therefore, Roland was sure they would take the two towns. As long as they made a thorough investigation and used the artillery troops to steadily push forward, they would not face great resistance from the enemies.

The reconstruction of the post-war order should be his focus of attention.

Fortunately, Willow Town was not a large-scale town. He did not need to set a fully-functional secondary City Hall as the one in the Longsong Area, but only to set up offices for each department correspondingly. Nowadays, the Border Area could offer a batch of fundamental management staff, so it would not be hard to add Willow Town to the political system of the City of Neverwinter.



As for Fallen Dragon Ridge, he would hand it over to Countess Spear for management. After the fall of Timothy, Spear had sworn allegiance to Roland and agreed to accept the overall management model of Western Region. In order to help her take over the city and cleaning up the rebel nobility, Roland believed it was necessary to garrison the first army there.

Plus, in the future, whether to further annex the Southern Territory or to conquer Iron Sand City, Fallen Dragon Ridge was the key traffic artery. So, the other purpose of the garrison was to prevent accidents. No matter what, Roland had to take hold of this city.

"In this way, there won't be many left in the First Army," after knowing the plan, Iron Axe said, frowning. "500 of them are guarding King's City, 1,000 will be dispatched to Willow Town and Fallen Dragon Ridge, and the number of soldiers I can freely mobilize is no more than 1,500, most of whom are artillery. Given that, City of Neverwinter probably will temporarily lose the ability to launch the attack."

"How is the training for the new soldiers recruited during the Months of Demons going?"

"Not even close to the regular troops," Iron Axe said while shaking his head. "They need to be trained for at least two to three more months."

Roland could not help laughing. He remembered when he

originally set up the Militia to resist demonic beasts, it went to the battlefield only after one and a half months' training. Now with the increasingly comprehensive construction of the army, the criterion of acceptability also greatly increased. In fact, as long as the soldiers could line up based on the order and take aim to pull the trigger, even in this era it was a strong army—After all, they only needed to aim and shoot without necessarily being under the attack of the enemies and risking their own lives.

"Don't worry. By then the garrison could be replaced by those new recruits, and it'll be a sort of training for them to fight against the guards of the noble." Roland said in a leisure tone, "When the emissary delegation for recruiting refugees returns, the population of City of Neverwinter will reach another peak. We can continue to expand our army then."

Seizing King's City was far from an end, and seizing Fallen Dragon was only a start. If everything went well, he hoped to annex the whole Southernmost Ridge before the arrival of the Months of Demons this year.

If he could get a stable supply of black water, he might be able to lead the industries of City of Neverwinter to a new stage.

Soon after Iron Axe left, Nightingale quietly appeared in front of Roland.

"Iffy wants to see you."

...

Looking at the witch from Bloodfang Association slowly walking into the office, Roland could feel some changes.

Her steps were not as firm as the time when she first arrived here; her maroon long hair was a little messy, which showed that she apparently did not care to take care of it. She did not look as vigilant and proud as before; instead, she looked rather confused and at a loss.

At this moment, she looked more like a girl at her real age.

Iffy bowed first, and then after a long silence, she opened her mouth. "Your Majesty, what's... the weapon that Maggie used?"

Roland had expected that she would ask about it. He nodded at Nightingale, and then Nightingale took the revolver out of her waist and put it on the table.

"What she used was a gun. It kills enemies with projectiles fueled by gunpowder." He skillfully removed the cartridge and poured out the bullets. "The projectiles used to shoot at you were modified in a particular way, otherwise you would have been killed on spot."

Iffy's lips moved as if she wanted to say something, but yet she swallowed her words in the end.

Roland picked up a bullet and raised it in front of everybody. "Do you see it?" It is not much bigger than a finger, but yet it requires

an extremely complicated procedure to manufacture it. The whole procedure required the joint work of hundreds of ordinary townsmen and three witches. Neither of the two groups is dispensable. And those are the non-combat witches who you think are useless. Do you still think so?"

"I..." She looked hesitated, but could not utter a word in the end.

Roland did not give her too much time to think. He continued, "Maybe they cannot compete with you in terms of abilities, but that doesn't prove anything. Although a commoner can't knock down a fierce beast with his bare hands, it's the human beings that rule the world, not the beasts."

"I prefer to call the non-combat witches as assistant witches. Through their own abilities, they can give the vast majority of ordinary people new forces, such as those guards who fight with long swords and shields—with the help of them, human beings can easily beat the beasts. In a sense, assistant witches are greater than combat witches."

"But the weapons you invented... can play a more powerful role in the hands of the combat witches," Iffy said in a low voice.

"The difference isn't very obvious, at least not obvious enough to change the outcome of a war." Roland shook his head. "Imagine this: while faced with ten ordinary soldiers armed with such weapon, what's the odd for you to win? In my territory, they can produce seven to eight such guns every day, but how many combat witches are there? Moreover, owning the weapons alone isn't enough. We also need to maintain them. To this end, we need a

massive production and logistics team, in which assistant witches play irreplaceable roles."

He reassembled the gun and returned it to Nightingale. "I know that it's hard for you to understand the fact instantly. But the reason human beings are greater than the beasts is that human beings can use their wisdom to create power that the world has never had. To this end, magic power is undoubtedly the best tool, and yet you're wasting this talent." He paused for a moment. "Right, the First Army reserve will have a maneuver using loaded rifles this afternoon. I suggest you watch it so that you can use your own eyes to observe what the real power is."

"The time has changed, Iffy."

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# Chapter 539: The Melting Ice

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Agatha had a busy day. By the time she returned to the castle, the sky had turned completely dark.

Pushing the door open, she was surprised to find Wendy waiting for her in the living room.

"Why did you work till so late again?" Wendy asked, frowning, but in her tone, there was not the slightest meaning of blame. Only a little bit of concern. "I hope you can come back earlier next time so that we can at least have dinner together."

"Sorry, I lost track of time," Agatha said as she took off her coat and hung it by the door. "My mind was all on producing the last batch of nitrogen, so I didn't notice the sky already turned dark when I left work. You should blame the Lord, turning on the lights in the chemical plant, making it as bright as daytime."

"I brought you dinner," said Wendy as she sighed helplessly. "It's on the table. It's still hot. So, hurry."

"Thank you," Agatha said, feeling touched. "Wendy is the most respected witch in the Witch Cooperation Association and is deeply trusted by the Lord. If she were in Taquila, she would have been at least an executive officer under the Three Chiefs. It's absolutely impossible in the Union for such a person to bring me dinner."

"You're welcome." Wendy patted her on the shoulder. "If you feel tired, don't hesitate to ask Echo to sing a hot spring song for you..."

Don't forget you're also a member of the Witch Union."

The Witch Union...

After the door was closed, Agatha kept still for a moment, and then went to the table and opened the metal insulated box.

The box contained three dishes and one soup: a fragrant barbecue steak, fried mushrooms, sliced bread, and egg soup. To her surprise, in a corner of the box was stuffed a small dish of honey.

She could not help but swallow her saliva.

Even Wendy noticed that...

During their decades of fighting against the demons in Taquila, all kinds of materials became more and more scarce. Naturally, that included food. Although Agatha was a relatively high rank, her daily meals consisted mainly of grains and fruits planted by assistant witches. Of course, she could eat meat, but its supply was not very stable. Things like spices, sugar, and honey were out of the question—the first two were a luxury exclusive to the high-level Federation officials; as for honey, witches who were able to keep bees were all sent to the battlefield. This was because the Federation would not "waste" them on producing such unessential sweet stuff.

In fact, she was very fond of eating sweet stuff, especially honey.

During the barbecue feast, when most people would choose pepper powder and salt as a seasoning, she just quietly brushed a whole jar of honey. She did not expect that Wendy had noticed that.

She suddenly felt something strange happening in her heart—because she could not feel coldness, she was not very sensitive to warmth either. Also, she had rarely used hot water while bathing because she did not want to bother Anna. Considering her own identity and origin, Agatha asked Roland to arrange a separate room for herself, just as her residence on the top floor of the test tower.

But now, she felt a little cold in the room.

Perhaps living with others was not a bad idea...

Agatha took out the honey, evenly smeared it on the bread, and slowly put it into her mouth. At that moment, she genuinely felt the warmth brought on by the fragrance and sweetness of the food.

...

After dinner, she planned to read "Elementary Chemistry" for a while before sleeping. The knowledge within might not be able to help her to further promote, but at least it could save her from feeling embarrassed in front of the common people.

Recently, a batch of strangers came to the chemical plant. Paper



told her that they were all from the Alchemist Workshop of the king's city. Every day, Agatha could see them walking between the laboratory and the chemical plant—sometimes led by Kyle Sichi, and other times by Kyle's student, Chavez. But, whenever Agatha saw them, their faces had an expression of disbelief—one could stuff an egg into any of their mouths—as if that was the only expression they could show. Besides, several of them were excessively curious and seemed to take her as a famous alchemist. Whenever they got a chance, they would pose questions to her. In the beginning, the questions were extremely simple, but gradually became somewhat difficult to cope with.

In order to maintain the dignity of the Senior Witches and the honor of the Quest Society, Agatha decided to keep her image in their eyes.

After spending those days with the commoners, she once again confirmed that what the Union did was wrong.

Roland has proven the wisdom of the noble, and the wisdom of these ordinary people is no less than that of the witches. It only took these ordinary people a few days to master the operation of the nitrogen equipment, while at the same time understanding the process of extracting nitrogen. In the beginning, they were arguing about the number of elements in the air, but now they were already discussing the composition of synthetic ammonia. Even a few white-haired old men, while smiling shyly, consulted with Paper, who was greatly startled.

Obviously, they're rapidly learning everything around them.

At this thought, Agatha felt overwhelmed with emotions. "The witches are neither the fortunate chosen by the deities nor the unfortunate abandoned by the deities. Essentially, they're no different from the common people, which is a certainty of the destiny." In this Battle of Divine Will, all should bare their corresponding destinies, and the witches are only a small cluster of people."

Perhaps this is the original intention of the deities. With any part missing, human beings can't win in this battle of destiny.

Suddenly, there came a knock on the door.

"Come in," Agatha said and turned around. "The door isn't locked."

Then, a tall, blonde, unhooded woman came in, but Agatha felt this woman was always shrouded under a shadow.

It was Nightingale.

"Anything you want?" Agatha asked her.

"His Majesty Roland wants to see you."

"If he wants to emphasize the theory of balancing work and rest and convince me to come back earlier, I already knew it and will pay attention to it in the future," Agatha said, twitching her lips. "No need to waste his precious time on me."

"Really..." said Nightingale, she blinked and felt Agatha was not bad-natured if one did not make an enemy of her. "This is only one of the reasons. His Majesty also said he wants to fight the demons."

Agatha was startled for a moment. "What?" Tossing the book on the table, she said, "Quickly, take me to him!"

...

Agatha rushed into the Lord's office. Before Roland could say anything, Agatha asked anxiously, "For the moment, we can't even put together ten Longsong Cannons and you want to attack Devil's Town? Do you think they're as fragile as human beings who throw away their helmets and flee after thousands of them are killed? You'll ruin the city and the good situation here!"

"Huh?" Roland looked astonished. "What're you talking about?"

"Aren't you planning to fight against the demons?"

He looked at Nightingale and chuckled. "No, that's not my plan. I don't want to destroy their camp. I only want to catch a few living demons."

# Chapter 540: Different Concerns

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"Is that all?"

Upon hearing it, Agatha felt slightly relieved.

The demons' strength lay in their numbers. If faced only with a few Mad Demons, one or two Senior Witches would be able to defeat them.

"Have you found a way to confine them?" Agatha asked.

"The newly arrived witches are perfect for that," Roland told her their abilities. "After Iffy catches the demons, the cage can be easily carried by the balloon. Of course, I'll prepare some shackles, so it's not a big problem to tame them either. What I want to know is how long the Red Mist carried by the demons can last, and can the demons' blood be used to produce Sigils after they die?"

"No wonder..." Until that moment, Agatha had fully understood what Roland was up to. "In general, a can of Red Mist can last for about a day. Demons will decide the number of mist cans to carry based on different tasks. For example, to carry out a surveillance or patrol mission, a demon's mount will carry three to four cans which is also its ability limit."

"Why so?" Roland asked curiously.

"After leaving the strange Blackstone Pagoda, the mist will

gradually lose effectiveness," she explained. "Otherwise, the Quest Society would have been keeping demons and Chaos Beasts and mass producing sigils. The Three Chiefs of the Union also tried that before. For example, they took the initiative to attack some of the demon's outposts to seize the small Blackstone Pagoda, but the enemies would always destroy it before their defeat, leaving the Blessed Warriors a withered stone pagoda."

"Withered?" Roland asked in great surprise, "Could stones wither too?"

"Nobody knew exactly what that thing was, but judging from the stone we brought back, "withered" was the proper word to describe it." Its once smooth surface became rough and dark; a lot of stone chips fell off when it was rubbed. It was totally different from its original appearance when the warriors first saw it."

"I see..." Roland pondered for a while. "If we can bring back a demon, can you produce the Sigil of Magic Stones?"

"If you can provide me with sufficient experimental materials, an independent laboratory, and 20 common people as assistants," Agatha said while counting on her fingers, "I have an 80% chance to produce simple Sigils, as to advanced Sigils... Ah, anyway, you don't have the related Magic Stones to produce them."

"These aren't the problem." Roland hesitated and then asked in a low voice, "The problem is, what if the entrapment mission draws too many demons?"

Agatha could not help but laugh. "You looked very confident. I thought you never worried about it."

"Ahem, I just want to be absolutely certain about everything."

Agatha then said with a relaxing tone, "Just take Miss Anna and me with them."

"You and... Anna?"

"You still lack a full understanding of the witches in your territory, Your Majesty." Agatha sighed. "You know, the Union, whose power covered the entire Fertile Plains, had just over 100 Senior Witches. Not more than 40 of them were combat witches. They held high positions in the Union and were the backbones of the Blessed Army. On the other hand, in your Witch Union, there're quite a few Senior Witches, and together with your strange weapons, their strength can be compared with the Wing of Holy Army. Defeating a group of demons won't be difficult for us. Even if we run into the Lord of Hell, Miss Anna can activate the Sigil of God's Will twice."

"Ah... I almost forgot about it." Roland suddenly understood, so he said, "Thank you for the suggestion."

"You're welcome. Defeating demons is my lifetime aspiration. Please don't let me down, Your Majesty."

When Agatha was about to leave, Roland stopped her.

"Well, there is another thing I don't understand."

"What's it?"

"Why did you resolutely oppose me attacking Devil's Town?" Roland raised his eyebrows. "Your previous attitude was very different from now... I remember at that time you not only demanded to attack the demons actively but also wanted to seize Chaos Beasts that may live in their camp at any cost, didn't you?"

Agatha suddenly felt her cheeks burning up. She knew they must be red even without checking.

"At that time, I didn't believe that you had the ability to defeat the demons, but you were bragging about your military forces, so I was saying that in a fit of pique." But it would be awkward to tell Roland the truth. But now the situation in the domain was sound. Given enough time, she believed the powers of humans would be increasingly stronger, so of course, her attitude had changed. "Did I? I don't remember saying anything like that."

"But you were..."

"Ahem, Your Majesty, I feel very sleepy." She forced a yawn. "Please excuse me now." Then she immediately left the office.

While she walked through the corridor leading to the Witch House, Agatha could feel the cool breeze gently blowing on her

face, which gradually cooled her mood.

Looking at the numerous stars in the sky, she suddenly remembered what Wendy said.

"One day, he'll become the King of Graycastle and lead us to defeat all our enemies. This is what I believe."

When looking at Wendy's convinced expression, Agatha felt both envious and slightly sad. She envied that Wendy had not been overwhelmed by the brutal reality, and she was sad to the fact that Wendy's conviction could not reverse the strength gap between humans and demons.

But now, she began to believe it too.

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Iffy did not remember how she got back to the bedroom.

Her mind was full of the memories of guns and cannons firing and roaring—hundreds of soldiers, neatly arranged in rows, aimed at the targets in front of them and pulled the trigger. She could see nothing but thick white smoke, and even if she could feel the bullets with her magic power, she did not have enough time to trap them with her cage.

"His Majesty didn't lie. The metal bullets are much more powerful than the special bullets Maggie used when she fought



with me. The metal bullets can destroy wooden targets 100 steps away, while in that distance, all the witches can do was to wait to be beaten.

As for another weapon called cannon is even more terrible. Its attack range is several times of the guns, and one even needs a telescope to observe its shooting results. Moreover, the head of the guards said that's only the old-fashioned field artillery, and a weapon called 152 mm Longsong Cannon is the real trump card of the artillery troop."

Various sounds of explosion echoed in her head, which led to one thought.

"Heidi Morgan lied to us."

Iffy murmured.

"Maybe Heidi Morgan doesn't even know such a power is possible." Softfeathers looked complex. Apparently, she was also shocked by the army training scenes she saw in the afternoon, "What should we do next?"

Iffy did not answer. "No matter what purposes Heidi had previously held, at the moment, it means nothing because the Bloodfang Association simply can't afford what His Majesty wants—Tilly Wimbledon's assistant witches are more useful than the combat witches of the Bloodfang Association."

Looking back at the past few years, she found her abilities and growth experience which she was once proud of now looked more like a joke. Except for Annie, there was nothing else worthy of cherishing in her memory.

After quite a while, she raised her head. "I don't want to go back to the Bloodfang Association."

"..." Softfeathers nodded with an almost unperceivable movement. "Me neither." And she was shocked. "Are you crying?"

Iffy then tasted something salty flowing into her mouth. Wiping her face, something wet reached her fingertips.

"I don't know."

It had been a long time since she tasted tears.

Beasts never cry.

Even if they do, they don't do it for themselves.

If only Annie and I had run into the Witch Union from the very beginning.

Closing her eyes, Iffy felt the salty rain trickling out from her heart.

Annie, forgive me.

# Chapter 541: The Mists of Bloodfang Association

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Two days later, Roland met Iffy in his office again.

Her complexion was much better now. In her eyes, they seemed to have more complex emotions, which made her look more fresh and alive, more "human".

"Heidi Morgan wants to see you, but she's not able to come over, so she asked Tilly Wimbledon to send us here." Iffy bowed to Roland, and her opening remarks surprised Roland slightly. "Lady Heidi doesn't like Her Highness, Tilly. She believes that combat witches are the real core of Sleeping Island, so the Bloodfang Association shouldn't just be treated as an ordinary witch organization. She wants to make a breakthrough with your help, and she promises to offer more than what Tilly offers. Of course... I know Your Highness doesn't need them."

"Tell me the details of the Bloodfang Association," said Roland with a hand propping up his chin.

"Yes..."

Her storytelling lasted about an hour, while Roland was frowning more and more. In the end, Roland could not help but ask, "Does Tilly know about all of this?"

"I don't know." Iffy shook her head. "Lady Heidi forbids us from

revealing the past of the Bloodfang Association, and seldom talks with Her Highness."

"How about the other witch organizations in Sleeping Island?"

"They're closer to the witches from the Kingdom of Graycastle, especially after the building of the Sleeping Spell. Although some combat witches agree with Lady Heidi secretly, most of them don't want to confront Ashes."

"It turns out the pressure on Tilly's shoulders is not much lesser than mine." Roland felt impressed. "Different from the situation that I'm the perfectly justified ruler of the Western Region, witches of Sleeping Island are more like in a loose organization based on covenants. Although Tilly is the organizer, she actually doesn't have the authority over those small groups who came to join her." Especially because of this, it showed Tilly's merits were superior to others—uniting most of the assistant witches, and positively establishing connections with the secular rulers of other islands. In particular, the invention of the Sleeping Spell gave her a chance to manage all the other witches.

After all, "Assistant witches are equally important" should not be just a slogan. The witches' bounty guild just offered those assistant witches with various odd abilities an excellent stage to present themselves. When they completed missions and obtained a large amount of remuneration, they could then use it to improve the quality of their lives on Sleeping Island. Such a mindset would be formed gradually. After all, no powerful combat witch would like to spend her days chewing salted fish. Especially when the assistant witches had their status promoted, they would naturally

favor Tilly. When the time came, as the leader of the guild, Tilly would undoubtedly gain a great power of speech.

This was probably why Heidi Morgan could not wait any longer.

In addition, the Bloodfang Association was full of doubtful points. As the daughter of Archduke Morgan, how could Heidi not be able to afford a group of non-combat witches? It was only fair to say that she did not intend to take those "useless" people in from the very beginning. Different from the fact that witches from the Witch Cooperation Association wanted to be united to help each other, all that she wanted was a team which could fight for her benefits.

Plus her obsession towards the Kingdom of Wolfheart, all of these made Roland vigilant against her.

He should probably write a secret letter to Tilly, telling her to carefully watch out the moves of the Bloodfang Association.

"Didn't Heidi forbid you from revealing the secrets of the Bloodfang Association?" He lightly knocked on the desk. "Don't you want to follow her instructions anymore?"

Iffy bit on her lips. "I want to join the Witch Union."

Roland stopped knocking and looked at her in surprise. Although he knew that the exhibition of the powers of the thermal weapons would greatly strike the powerful and arrogant combat witches, he

did not expect the effect would be so... extraordinary.

"But you hurt Maggie." He contemplated for a while. "Right now I can't..."

"About that, you can punish me as you wish."

Iffy unbuttoned her robe.

Almost at the same time, a pair of hands covered Roland's eyes from behind. But Nightingale seemed to have forgotten that she was in the mist and that her transparent fingers could not block Roland's vision.

Iffy lowered her robe and turned her back to Roland.

Roland could not help but gasp.

He could see, on Iffy's back there were all sorts of whip scars. The restored wounds looked like numerous earthworms lying crisscross on her back, forming a sharp contrast with the surrounding delicate skin. As the wounds had been healed, even Nana could not do anything to them with her healing ability. Those scars remained as they were.

When Iffy talked about the rigorous fighting trainings in the Bloodfang Association, she only used very brief words. Now when Roland thought back, he could vaguely smell the bloody atmosphere in her words.

"Put on your clothes," he said with a low voice.

"But, Your Majesty..."

Nightingale had shown herself and pulled up Iffy's robe to the shoulders.

"If you want to join the Witch Union, then don't bring the Bloodfang Association's ways of handling things here." Roland suddenly felt a suppression in his chest. "You can apply to Wendy. As to whether the other witches would accept you, it'll depend on your performance." He paused. "Anyway, City of Neverwinter is the home to witches. Even if you don't join the union, you can settle down here."

Upon hearing this, Iffy's shoulders loosened. "Thank you... for your kindness."

...

After watching her leave, Roland stood up, walked to the French window, and let out a deep breath.

Till now, his team for arresting demons was fully assembled and yet he could not feel relaxed.

"Actually, she's very lucky," Nightingale walked to him and said.



"Can that be called lucky?"

"Compared with her friend Annie, at least she survived. If the Bloodfang Association is really the only witch organization survived in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, then its members will end tragically in case they get caught by the church or the noble. That's also why the member witches yearned so much for the Holy Mountain."

A doubt suddenly emerged in Roland's heart. "Were those non-combat witches really sent to other witch organizations by Heidi Morgan? To avoid the exposure of their whereabouts, the witches seldom contacted one another, and their gathering places changed frequently. How did Heidi gathered such information? After all, the foothold of an organization is a matter of life and death. If not to particularly trusted persons, the organization leader probably won't tell other people of their gathering sites easily."

Even if Heidi knew all that, sending the witches to other organizations was highly risky of an exposure. Would the other organizations willingly accept whatever she threw at them?

The more he thought about it, the more he found it weird.

But Nightingale confirmed that Iffy was not lying.

Obviously, the problem lay within the founders of the Bloodfang Association.

In conclusion, Heidi seemed more dangerous now. Roland realized that he should convey the information to Tilly as soon as possible so that she could carry out an investigation and make some early preparations.

The daughter of Archduke Morgan was most likely not royal to witches.

# Chapter 542: The Wicked Journey

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"Sister, we've arrived." Cole Kant happily rushed into the cabin.

"I've told you twice during this trip to not call me sister." Edith raised her head and took a glance at him. "Have you forgotten?"

"No..." Cole shivered. "No, I still remember."

"Then who am I?"

"My, my Clerk, Miss Edith."

"Who are you then?"

"Father... No, the ambassador sent out by Calvin Kant, the Duke of the Northern Region."

"Great. Make sure that you don't make the same mistake for the third time." Edith stood up, stretched her stiff limbs, and walked out of the cabin. "Call all the members of the emissary delegation. Let's go to the inner city."

This was a little trick Edith liked to play. She liked to secretly observe the person she was about to negotiate with and then only revealed herself after having a rough understanding of what kind of person the other party was. In doing so, she could take precautions beforehand and impress the other. If the one she

negotiated with was male, he would most likely be interested in her.

She never tried to hide her gender; on the contrary, she used it as a social advantage.

Since she was called the Pearl of the Northern Region, she certainly needed to make good use of it.

"How about... the heads then?"

"Leave them on the boat, unless you want to hold them in your bedroom." She twitched her mouth. "They have gone rotten."

Walking off the trestle, Edith noticed that there were many boats on the canal. Many people were at the dock, most of whom carried big luggage. Judging from their clothing, they looked neither like slaves, nor businessmen. She was quite curious about it because as far as she knew, people in the other walks of life seldom traveled at the spring plowing season.

She sent for a servant. "Go ask them where they're going."

"What does it have to do with us?" Cole asked in bewilderment.

"Since Roland Wimbledon has taken over this city, he must have issued some new policies to declare his authority. What he said can, in a way, reflect his characteristics. So, it certainly has something to do with us." Edith smiled. "Of course you can pay a

few gold royals for the Rats to gather the information, but I personally prefer first-hand information."

"Is, is that so..."

"You need to observe more, think more, my dear ambassador." She said, "This is a rare opportunity."

On the other side of the city gate, the streets were filled with more pedestrians. There were booths on both sides of the road. He could hear constant cries from vendors. A few years ago, Edith had been to the king's city to participate in the fifth princess' adulthood ceremony with her father. This city had not changed much. It was still as busy as it used to be.

If it were in the City of Evernight, one could have never seen such a crowd except for a holiday or a celebration.

All of a sudden, a speaker on the street caught her attention.

"Hold on for a while." Edith ordered the troop to stop and joined the crowd with Cole.

"Can you saw wood? Can you lay bricks? Can you take care of cattle and sheep? As long you specialize in something, you're the talents His Majesty is looking for! Go to Western Region. There, His Majesty is building a new king's city—City of Neverwinter! Your talent will bring you a huge reward!"

"Talent?" Edith pondered on it for a while. "What an interesting name... However, what does it mean by a new king's city? The City of Neverwinter? Is there such a city in Western Region?"

Pacing forward a little bit, she saw another group of people.

"Witches are innocent. This is the repentance the High Priest wrote down right before his execution," another speaker said, waving the document in his hand. "They may be your close relatives, your daughter, your sister!" If you're still afraid of them, send them to the City of Neverwinter! They'll be well taken care of. If you hate to part with them, you can go with them! His Majesty has promised, the witches' families will get an accommodation to protect from wind and rain. Plus, you'll also get a decent job!"

"Has the High Priest been executed?" Cole said with his eyes wide open.

On the other hand, Edith frowned. "If this is Roland Wimbledon's new policy, the way he promotes it's quite melodramatic. Isn't he afraid to provoke the church to a full revenge? That'll be nothing like the fight among nobles, but a deadly war against the heresies.

No idea whether it's a blessing or a curse to serve such a king."

It took her an hour to walk through the street leading to the inner city. She found actually the street was full of such speakers who basically repeatedly told whatever His Majesty had done after conquering the king's city. Anyone who came to the king's city only needed to listen on the street for half a day to understand the

changes His Majesty had made, without the need to get any help from the Rats.

"My Lady, I've found it out." The servant who was sent to inquire about the news caught up with the team, panting. "They're all going..."

"City of Neverwinter, right?" Edith interrupted him.

"You, you knew it?"

"Don't bother finding a hotel now. We're going to the palace to submit the emissary document." Her heart was filled with a vague sense of foreboding. "Now, hurry!"

...

"What?" Cole asked in surprise. "His Majesty left the king's city a week ago? Without even holding an inauguration ceremony?"

"That's what the receptionist said," the attendant reported. "At first His Majesty left a man named Barov Mons, his chief minister, behind to take care of daily affairs, but Barov Mons left the king's city yesterday too. Apart from the servants, there's nobody else in the palace. The receptionist said if you want to talk with the City Hall, he can pass the message for you."

"That's fine," Edith said in a cold voice. She did not expect her hunch was right. She had been traveling non-stop all the way, yet

still was too late to catch up with Roland. "Roland was really planning to move the capital, leave this splendid city behind, and rebuild a new capital city in Western Region! What's exactly in his head? To build a city on such a scale as the king's city would take at least 30 to 40 years!"

"What should we do?" Looking at the stunned members of the emissary delegation, Cole asked quietly.

After a long while, she said sullenly, "Turn around. Head for the City of Neverwinter!"

"They've left anyway. No need to hurry," Cole said with a bitter face. "It's been a week since I took a shower last time. I feel lice are about to grow on my body."

Edith turned her head and found her collar also smelled weird. Finally, she sighed. "Let's find a hotel for the night. We'll set off tomorrow morning."

In the next morning, when the emissary delegation arrived at the dock, they found their boat had been burned to a skeleton.

"What happened?" For the first time, Edith felt confused.

"Ahem, don't be mad, sis-Miss Edith. Observe more, think more..." Cole waved his hand and stopped a passerby. "The dock will catch fire as well?"



"Ah, you mean that." The passerby enthusiastically explained, "No idea who sneakily hid bodies on their boat. The Rats who tried to steal something from the boat smelled it." You know, people are very cautious about such stuff. After all, half a year ago a demonic plague struck the city, which was exactly caused by the bodies distributed by the church. Anyway, to deal with them, burning is the safest way. The captain has been arrested by the guards for interrogation. Oh, do you know him?"

Edith was startled, not knowing what face she should put on. After a long silence, she uttered, "I don't know him. Thanks."

"It seems we need to find a new boat." She thought. "I guess this trip of loyalty won't go as smoothly as I imagined..."

# Chapter 543: The Turning Point

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Barov was like a different person when Roland met him again.

He looked vigorous and radiant, and even his chest had risen considerably. His footsteps were powerful and conveyed a strong sense of confidence. He was not how a 50-year-old minister typically looked.

It seemed that the days he spent in the king's city was highly satisfactory.

"If I had known it, I would have called you back a little later." Roland joked.

"No, Your Majesty. Regardless of how prosperous the City of Dawn is, it can't compare with the City of Neverwinter personally created by you." Barov responded while smoothing his mustache. "Wherever I am, my heart will always be with you."

Why do these words... sound so weird and awkward?

Roland coughed twice and attempted to change the subject. "How's the situation over there?"

"Don't worry. With my students and the First Army around, the new assigned nobles aren't able to create trouble even if they intend to," the director replied smugly. "I've deliberately given them more space to fight for money and power among themselves.

As long as they don't disrupt the normal livelihoods of the citizens, that is acceptable. I believe that, for a long period of time henceforth, they'll scheme and scramble among themselves to attain the tiniest amount of power—after all, they've had absolutely no qualification to enter the City Hall thus far."

"It's indeed a good idea." Roland commented and laughed.

Although he knew a thing or two about political balancing and other control strategies, he was obviously not as good at actualizing them as these old foxes who had been involved in politics for a long time. While they might not be the wiliest of foxes, they were definitely thick-skinned and vicious enough. It could be said that it was only now that Barov revealed the true extent of his talents.

As the king, Roland could stay out of dabbling in dirty political tricks himself. As long as he had the personnel, law and military power in his grip, nobody would dare to covet his authority.

"Your Majesty, may I ask where have you sent Treasurer Lauren Moore?" Barov revealed a little displeasure as he sighed. "The ceremonial officer told me that you didn't execute him."

"He siphoned off some of the relief rations distributed to the people, colluded with the former Prime Minister, and was involved in the exploitation of refugees." Roland shrugged. "His crimes didn't warrant execution, and while at his age, he wasn't suitable to be sent to the mines. The only thing I could do was to deport him."

"That's a real... pity."

"Why, you need him for something?"

"Of course not. Lauren was rather influential in the king's city. I was just afraid that the lower nobles wouldn't be able to handle him." Barov laughed and shook his head. "As my mentor, he bullied me for a long time. I regret that I didn't have the opportunity to see him begging for mercy."

Roland joined the laughter. "I believe that he could bring his whole family to the Kingdom of Dawn. Who knows, you may get to see him again one day." Let's not talk about this. I called you back because I intend to build a few factories. They're related to the upcoming series of major reforms in the City of Neverwinter."

"Do you need a lot of people?"

"Yes indeed, otherwise I'd only have to call Karl." Roland nodded. "I'll need at least 3,000 people."

Barov forced a smile. "Your Majesty, that's a huge demand worthy of you. In other cities, there's no chance that a project would require 3,000 people at the same time."

"The good news is, not every one of these 3,000 people needs to be literate. I'll only require more than 200 of them to have completed primary education."

"What do you want to build?"

Roland placed the records which were prepared long ago in front of the director. "A coke plant, a steel plant, and a forge."

"Is the steel produced by Miss Anna not enough?" Barov asked.

"The problem is that it's too inefficient." Roland sighed. "Her magic power should be used for more sophisticated manufacturing, rather than wasted on preparing the materials for steam engines. I hope that I can "de-witch" the basic industrial productions this year."

At present, the industries of Neverwinter had reached an turning point. If a breakthrough was not found, it would be hard to progress. This was because the source power machines heavily depended on Anna's materials, and therefore the scale of production could not be expanded. In fact, the steam engines could be produced without using such a high grade of steel. The first generation of steam engines was made out of iron only.

Now, the preconditions for a breakthrough had been fully satisfied. The coal mine was able to handle all of the coking processes—coke was one of the primary ingredients of large-scale steelmaking. The dozen or so earth blast furnaces in the Furnace Area also supplied an abundant amount of iron ingots. Steel could be smelted using a simple converter, while the steam hammers in the forge could be used to create components that the other factories could directly process. If these procedures could be made

into a cycle, Anna would be completely liberated from her duties, and only normal people would be needed throughout the production process.

After Roland outlined the important tasks of the three projects, Barov quickly understood the meaning of "de-witch".

"I understand, Your Majesty. However, are these things really possible?" He appeared unconvinced. "Can we really obtain enough steel without relying on the demons'... ahem, witches' powers? You may not have known that in other cities, it's common for a piece of forged steel to cost 20 times the price of a piece of pig iron."

In this era, steel was forged by the blacksmith's hammer. The repeated hammering of the iron ingots caused excess carbon and other impurities to be oxidized until steel was formed. Of course, the efficiency of this process was unspeakably low, and a lot of raw materials would be wasted. A significant amount of iron would break off due to oxidation, and therefore several pieces of iron ingot were necessary to produce a usable piece of steel. This explained why a full set of body armor that was completely made of steel was the lifelong desire of many knights. It could even be passed down from generation to generation as a family treasure.

From a certain perspective, the laborious method of producing steel could give one the false perception that the effort put into it made it more exquisite and higher-grade. Now that City of Neverwinter could mass produce steel, believed by most people to be the witches' work, Barov's suspicions were not hard to understand. However, to Roland, steel was just iron with a

different proportion of carbon.

"I won't say it's easy. Both coking and converter steelmaking require techniques that were discovered by trial and error. However..." Roland paused briefly. "These projects are definitely achievable. When they're completed, there'll be hundreds of chimneys in the industrial area. The monthly output of steel will exceed the current annual output. We'll then have an endless supply of steel to produce bicycles, ships, all kinds of machines, and even houses. Everything that you see will be made of steel. It'll be in everyone's homes, and even the common folk will be able to use steel utensils and tools."

Barov remained speechless for a long time before he finally replied, "I'll draw up a recruitment plan and financial allocation plan for you to review as quickly as possible."

"Okay, you'll be in charge of the preparatory work for this," Roland said in encouragement.

As Barov walked toward the office door, he abruptly turned back and bowed down at Roland.

"It'll be my pleasure and honor to see a world like that, Your Majesty."

...

# Chapter 544: A New Source of Power

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"The prospect of a new world, huh?" Roland could not help laughing.

He then asked Nightingale to summon Anna in.

At these times, Nightingale would leave voluntarily to give the two of them privacy.

Anna was wearing a light blue one-piece dress, underneath which her knee-length black stockings were visible, and her feet were covered in a pair of moccasins. All these made her appear particularly lively. These modern-styled items of clothing were tailored under the guidance of Roland during his spare time using flow-coated fabrics that were provided by Soraya. They were extremely light, easy to wear, and highly durable. They were thus perfectly suitable for Anna to wear when she was crafting apparatus.

Whenever Roland looked into her sparkling eyes, he would feel a surge of happiness and smile uncontrollably.

Of course, he no longer needed to act as mannerly as he used to.

He wrapped his arms around her and sat her on his lap. Then he took a sniff of her hair and kissed her cheek before getting to the point. "I want to develop a new source of energy."



"Will it be something like the steam engine?" She turned her head back to face him. Her collarbone could be seen protruding along her fair neck.

Roland could not resist reaching his hand out to stroke her collarbone. It tickled her such that she began to laugh shyly.

"Your Majesty, be proper."

"Hehe, alright." He placed Anna on the seat and stood up to extract a stack of blueprints from the files on one side of the table. "Have a look at this first... How much can you understand it?"

"Um..." Whenever Anna was studying something, her expression would turn completely solemn. Roland would often feel an unexplainable sense of shame and inferiority when he observed her looking aloof—it felt to him as though he was sitting in a naturally well-lit classroom and peeking at the smartest student in the class.

In order to counteract this feeling, he thought of the naughty things he would do to her at night.

"I've more or less understood everything." After Anna looked through the last of the blueprints, she thought for a moment and nodded. "It's also powered by steam, except that the piston is replaced by windmill blades, and therefore saves energy on the reciprocating motion of the connecting rods. Am I right?"

"You're absolutely right." Roland discarded his wild thoughts and put on a serious face. "It's called the steam turbine. While it's also powered by high-pressure steam, its efficiency is much higher than the steam engine."

This was the revolutionary product which Roland had conceived for a long time.

It could be said that Anna was the main reason why he wanted to rid the basic industries of dependence on witches—only this way would she be able to focus on high-end mechanical production.

The steam turbine was his experiment within this field.

Turbines had many uses. They could be used to power ships and provide electricity, especially the latter—it could be foreseen that after Fallen Dragon Ridge was captured, Countess Spear would have to spend a long time sorting out government affairs. It would not be wise to rely solely on Mystery Moon's magic power to provide night lighting for the industry area, not to mention the residential area's electricity supply. Roland certainly did not want to admit that this was a planning failure caused by his lack of experience. In order to make up this mistake, he had to think of an alternative means of producing electricity.

Due to the natural flaws of the circulation principle, the electricity generated by steam engines was inconsistent. Furthermore, Roland had weak knowledge of voltage regulation. It was thus a more suitable choice to use steam turbines, which had more stable output power and higher thermal efficiency.

"What do I have to do first?" Anna asked.

"Remember what you did for the gunboat?" Roland showed her a blueprint of a blade. "You'll need to build an operable model of this. It only needs to be about one meter in length. The main problem you have to solve is the angle of the blade. It has to allow high-pressure steam to flow smoothly through every stator grille. If you can do this, more than half of the work would be done."

Yet, how could a usable end product be built without detailed data?

The only way was repeated trial and error.

As for the core of the turbine—Roland was not worried about the difficulty of altering the impeller because the cutting precision of Blackfire was much higher than any modern machining tool. He also did not worry about the strength of the materials—after all, impellers usually operated at a temperature of 500 to 600°C, and the alloy steel discovered by Lucia was more than competent for this task. The key problem was the angular coordination between the stator cascade and the impeller. The former was like a fixed barrier that could alter the angular direction of the passage of steam so as to prevent the steam from impacting with the impeller all at the same time. It also prevented directional disorder and the production of opposite forces. In essence, it was like a comb for airflow disorder.

If the model that Anna built was operable, Roland would mass

produce it, and then there would be no more difficulties.

After the processing methods and the quality of materials were improved, the industrial results would be inevitably substantial.

"I understand." Anna's eyes gleamed, as though signaling that she was ready to begin work.

"No hurry." Roland held her hand tightly. "You should have heard from Wendy that I've decided to launch an attack to capture the demons."

"Yes," Anna replied, "will you be going along?"

Roland shook his head calmly.

"That's good." Anna rested her head on his shoulder. "The last time, I was almost frightened to death when I saw you injured."

"Really? But I've heard from Nightingale that you were the calmest person around. If it wasn't for your decisive plan, I might truly have..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Anna covered his mouth with her soft hand. "Don't say that word."

She only loosened her hand after Roland nodded in acknowledgement. He then continued, "Anyway, what I want to

say is that you have to take good care of yourself, understand? If anything happens, use the Sigil of God's Will immediately without hesitation. It's okay even if you don't capture the demons... I'll be waiting at the castle for your triumphant return."

"Don't worry." Anna laughed. "I won't let them hurt the other witches either."

...

After Anna left, Roland stayed silent for a long time before he murmured, "Are you around?"

"Of course." Nightingale's figure appeared on top of the study table. "But I didn't eavesdrop on what the two of you said. I only returned after she left."

Roland stood up and walked over to the window. While looking towards the direction of the snow mountains, he explained to Nightingale the hunting plan that he had conceived. "Before setting out, you all will have to rehearse a few times to familiarize with the entire hunting procedure, as well as understand your own and one another's tasks. Moreover, this plan is only effective if you're facing a small number of demons. It'll have to be adjusted based on the situation." He paused briefly before continuing. "If you ever run into the worst kind of situation... and I mean the most hopeless and irredeemable situation, you must bring Anna back no matter what."

Nightingale did not say anything. Instead, she waited until

Roland turned his head back to look at her, before replying with a disconcerting look on her face. "Is this the real reason why you aren't going?"

Roland could not deny the truth. "If not, you'd definitely choose to save me, right?"

"... understood." Nightingale sighed lightly. "I'll do my best."

"It's all on you." Roland patted her shoulders and enunciated.

# Chapter 545: Battle Rehearsal

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City of Neverwinter, north of the border city wall.

Upon reaching the former test site, Iffy found that many witches were already gathered there. Among them were Maggie and her perpetual companion, a golden-haired young girl.

"She seems to be called Lightning." Iffy thought.

When the young girl saw Iffy, she viciously shook her fist and grimaced, before tugging Maggie to a far distance away.

If it were three days ago, Iffy would have made it a point to lecture the two of them that they have to maintain respect in front of a combat witch.

But this time, she simply laughed silently.

The young girl's alert expression reminded Iffy of Annie. "When I was at that age, Annie was just like that girl. She was always careful and vigilant, and always walked in front to protect me."

It's clearly only by chance that the two of us sought refuge together.

Perhaps, this is what the Union calls... "sisters".

"Since everyone's here, I'll begin to explain the mission. It's codenamed 'Melting Point' and Miss Agatha will be the commander." Roland proclaimed before he walked into the middle of the audience. "Of course, many of you already know the details of the mission. However, for the sake of the newcomers, I'll explain everything all over again."

Do the newcomers... refer to me?

Iffy immediately gathered her focus.

No matter what, this is the first mission assigned by the new lord. Since he has asked me to take part, it means that there's some battle involved. This will be a good opportunity to demonstrate the value of my abilities. Iffy thought.

"In order to understand the enemy's strength and hasten the research of the Sigil of Magic Stones, you all will be heading to Devil's Town behind the snow mountains. You'll draw the demons out to fight, and use ambush to capture them alive..."

...

After Roland finished his explanation, Iffy was unable to collect her wits for a long time.

Surely there's nothing wrong with my ears! Jesus, is he serious?

Were these demons really responsible for destroying the witches'



empire that ruled over the entire mainland? This blue-haired woman, who serves as the commander of this mission, is a senior witch from over 400 years ago? The Battle of Divine Will shall decide the fate of mankind? These nasty enemies are hiding somewhere not far from the Western Region?

How is any of this possible!

She maintained a stiff face as she glanced over at the other witches. However, she realized that there was not a hint of surprise on any of their faces.

It was apparent that all of them knew of these things beforehand.

"Now, Agatha will talk about the things you'll need to pay attention to during the mission, as well as brief you on the tactical arrangement."

Agatha nodded and stepped forth. "According to our intelligence, there's a vigilant Eye Demon in the demons' camp. This is crucial to our plan to lure the demons out. Anyone who sees it will be seen back by it. If our position is adjudged to be far away, the first group of enemies to be expected will be the Flying Devilbeasts. There aren't many of these demons, particularly in such a remote place. The last time we went, there were only two. I don't expect the number to have changed."

"We are disadvantaged in aerial combat, and therefore the best plan is to draw them towards the ground. If so, I'll be able to handle both of them myself. However, the Mad Demons which

they may carry on their backs will be left to Miss Iffy to handle." Agatha glanced at the latter. "If you manage to capture them, our mission will be considered a success."

"She seems to be only slightly older than me, but yet it's said that she has lived for over 400 years?" Iffy remained in a daze for a while before mumbling incoherently, "I, I understand."

"You've never seen demons before, and so it's normal to be doubtful." Agatha seemed to have read her thoughts. "Wendy has records of the Association's encounters with demons. After the rehearsal, you may go and have a look. This will save you from being completely stunned when you see them in reality."

These words made Iffy frown involuntarily. "Completely stunned? Even if the enemies come straight from hell, they'll soon be crying piteously in the cage I set for them!"

"How do we pull them towards the ground?" Lightning asked.

"Abandon the hot air balloon and enter the Misty Forest." Agatha crouched on the ground and used stones to create a visual diagram. "When Sylvie notices the enemies chasing, you and Maggie will immediately escort those on the balloon into the forest. I've confirmed this with His Majesty. If it's a hydrogen balloon, Wendy will be able to operate it alone. Together with Sylvie making eye contact with the Eye Demon, the two of them will be able to escape at the same time."

"As the Devilbeasts approach the balloon, you'll then be

responsible to lure them into the forest. Because their lines of vision will be obstructed, they'll descend to the ground and hunt. Be careful of the enemies' spears. I trust that you'll be able to evade them easily."

"Ooh, this plan sounds exciting." Lightning exclaimed with a wide grin on her face. "Count on me!"

"The forest is Leaf's natural home ground. Once the demons enter the ambush area, they'll be trapped. I don't have to tell you what to do next."

"What if there are more than two Devilbeasts?" A witch with jade green hair asked.

"If there are several of them, the demons will probably split up and hunt. What you can do is to keep a few more people in the balloon to conduct aerial surveillance, while the rest enter the forest." Agatha paused for a moment. "If that's the case, Anna will handle any enemies in the air. But remember, the lethal range of the Sigil of God's Will is limited. It's best to activate the Sigil only when the Devilbeasts gather together. Furthermore, Anna won't be able to use her own abilities while activating the Sigil. During that time, Leaf, you must make sure to protect Anna."

"How about me?" Nightingale questioned.

"You'll accompany Iffy. Her ability is only effective within a range of ten steps, and therefore she's vulnerable to the demons' spears when in an exposed position. You'll use your Mist to shorten

the distance with the enemies quickly."

"Okay..." Nightingale turned her head and took a good look at Iffy. The latter immediately felt the aura of the former's magical power. It was sharp and cold, as though it was a substance of its own. "Don't you be a burden."

Iffy could sense that the former was also a combat witch. Not only that the former had experienced many bloody battles and had a lot of blood on her hands.

"Alright, everyone shall begin the rehearsal." Agatha clapped her hands in encouragement. "We'll start with luring the demons out."

...

An hour into the rehearsal, Iffy already had a general understanding of the abilities of every witch participating in the mission.

She was surprised that there were many witches here who could be considered combat witches.

Take Leaf for example. She hid her in a tree trunk in the forest. She could manipulate the entire forest to do her bidding. This type of ability was almost inconceivable and was on a level that completely transcended the usual limits of a witch.

Or Wendy, who although was only in charge of controlling the

balloon, could summon a small hurricane that turned stones and dirt into painful bolts.

Agatha's frost could serve both as a shield and a sharp blade. She was therefore equally proficient in offense and defense, at least when at close range.

Nightingale was even more terrifying. Once she entered her Mist, she could travel to almost any part of the world she wanted. The physical obstructions of the real world did not affect her at all. Having experienced the power of this ability, Iffy could imagine that in a real battle, it made its user invincible. By moving without trace and being impossible to guard against, Nightingale would make all enemies despair quickly.

Yet, the most curious talent of all was Anna. According to the mission plan, this young woman who looked like she was barely out of her adolescence was the real ace in the team. "How powerful does her ability have to be to vanquish all of the demons in one go?"

Iffy did not have to wait long to know the answer.

# Chapter 546: The Mystery of God's Stones

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Anna's task was completely separated from everyone else's.

She only began to practice using the Sigil of God's Will after everyone else was completely familiar with the entire hunting process.

Although Iffy could not comprehend what kind of ability the Sigil of God's Will possessed, she could observe that the witches were all extremely excited about the rehearsal that was about to happen.

Did they rarely get a chance to see Anna display her ability?

Iffy's curiosity grew.

She watched as Anna strolled towards the middle of the field carrying an odd-looking sheet of metal in her hands.

Anna did not look like a combat witch at all. Her calm expression resembled the crystal clear water of a lake. From her movements and gestures, it was evident that she had never been in a life-and-death battle before.

The sheet of metal she was carrying also puzzled Iffy greatly. It was only about the size of a palm and was perfectly flat on both sides. Glittering gemstones were embedded on it. In no way did it look like a weapon.

"Let the balloons fly." Agatha gestured towards the direction of the Misty Forest. After a short while, several colorful balloons emerged from the forest canopy and flew up high into the sky.

"Go! Shoot them down!" She shouted.

"Wait... this is probably too far." Iffy mused. "The distance from the field to the edge of the forest is at least 250 meters. How would Anna be able to shoot these things down without flying? Unless, she's also able to transcend the usual limits of ability, and deliver the effects of her magic power to the sky?"

Anna nodded at Agatha. She raised the sheet of metal and pointed it in the direction of the balloons.

Shortly, Iffy witnessed a scene that she could hardly believe...

The four gemstones emitted a dazzling light at the same time. In a split second, the sheet of metal turned to gold in color. Thunderous claps were heard from the clear sky, while rays of light weaved together in the clouds and spattered. It was as if a new sun was being formed in the heavens.

Her ability can actually manipulate the entire sky!?

Before the crowd could even exclaim in astonishment, a blinding beam of gold light burst out of Anna's hands directly toward the balloons. The light rays in the sky were also controlled, and

immediately, numerous thunderbolts could be seen following along the trail of the golden light and violently sweeping through the locations of the targets. It all seemed like a punishment that only God could have ordained! To Iffy, it was as though the deafening roars came from right beside her ears, causing her brain to buzz for a long time. By the time the light rays disappeared, she had yet to recover fully.

What kind of amazing ability is this?

Iffy's body continued to quiver uncontrollably as she stared at the empty sky above the forest. "Even if all of the combat witches of the Bloodfang Association gathered together, they would not be able to handle such a force. Did she rely on her own abilities or that sheet of metal to be able to do this?"

In the face of a show of strength like this, it would not make a difference if the enemies were the wild beasts which Heidi Morgan mentioned or just a flock of sheep.

Iffy suddenly remembered His Majesty Roland's suggestion.

Is this... the power of the senior witches?

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It turned out that it was also the first time that Roland witnessed a complete demonstration of the power of the Sigil of God's Will.



The initial light rays seemed to leave an invisible trail behind them, allowing the golden thunderbolts that followed behind to take the same path. Furthermore, the location of the first thunderbolt strike was situated at the edge of the forest. This probably meant that the user of the Sigil was able to control it such that it only split apart when near to the enemies.

Another thing that Roland observed about the light rays was that they were only about as thick as an arm when released, but they quickly expanded in the shape of a fan, and the eventual range of each ray was approximately 50 meters. During the age of cold weapons, this was undoubtedly considered an apocalyptic weapon of mass destruction.

"Are all of those light rays... created by magic power?" Roland looked at Nightingale.

"I guess, probably, yes." The latter hesitated for a bit before answering.

"Probably?"

"In the mist, I could indeed see the frenzied surge of magic power, but..." She revealed a puzzled look on her face. "Its color is different from any magic power that I know or have seen before."

"What color is it?"

"Black, or should I say, the color of no light." Nightingale

frowned. "They looked like black holes formed by the God's Stone of Retaliation."

Roland shuddered. "How is it possible that the color of the magic power of the gold-glittering Sigil is black in the misty world? Does this mean that the characteristics of their magic power are the same or at least similar?" In his brief trance, Roland seemed to think of something. "There's a relationship between the God's Stones and Magic Stones." It seemed as if he was on the verge of an audacious theory.

After he returned to his office in the castle, he summoned Agatha in.

"How many times did your people research on the Sigil of God's Will?"

"Not many. I've already told you everything that we found out. After all, only our chiefs were able to activate this type of sigil. Because their magic powers were crucial to our battles, there wasn't much that could be spared for this kind of experiment." She then asked curiously, "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"You mentioned before that the Sigil was able to penetrate the defenses of the God's Stone of Retaliation, right?"

Agatha nodded. "Not all the time. It depends on the quality of the God's Stones."

"Have you never observed the characteristics of the Sigil of God's Will's magic power?" Roland asked softly. "In the Mist, the magical thunderbolts invoked by the Sigil are the same color as the God's Stone."

"No... we've certainly done this experiment before. It was necessary that we recorded the characteristics of the magic power. However, during the activation of the Sigil, the Stone of Measuring would lose its monitoring function. And because our chiefs could certainly not visit the Quest Society every day, we simply recorded the observed color as gold." Agatha blinked a few times. "Wait, are you saying that it has the same color as the interference area of the God's Stone?"

"Indeed," Roland replied unhurriedly. "I have a theory that the God's Stone of Retaliation does not create black holes that neutralize magic power, but instead, it contains a great amount of magic power such that it affects and nullifies the operation of magic in its vicinity. This is also why the Sigil of God's Will causes the Stone of Measuring to lose its effectiveness. It creates a similar interference area as the God's Stone of Retaliation within its range of influence, and therefore the Stone of Measuring did not have any effect."

"But the trainee who's responsible for observing magic power has explicitly said that..." Agatha suddenly paused halfway through her sentence.

"Her observation was obstructed by the dazzling light emitted by the Sigil, like shadows being covered by light." Roland quickly opined. "Whereas in Nightingale's misty world, only magic power

possesses color. She can even stare directly at the sun without being affected. This is why you weren't able to make this discovery."

Observing magic power was a derivative skill of the witches. It was limited by the witches' individual visual level. Furthermore, observations done in the day and night would yield different conclusions. Sylvie could fully prove this point. With her Eye of Magic, she could discover magic activity performed several kilometers away. Her detection range was far superior to Nightingale's.

This was why the Quest Society heavily trusted the results tested by the Stone of Measuring. Its accuracy was independent of the person operating it and the environment it was operated in, and thus it provided an overall highly accurate assessment of the magic power involved. It was almost as good as being able to observe under Nightingale's Mist. Therefore, the Quest Society would only accept the conclusion of the observer when the Stone of Measuring was unable to operate.

# Chapter 547: Operation [Melting Point]

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Agatha exasperatingly paced to and fro in front of the mahogany table. "So, according to you, the Sigil of God's Will can penetrate the God's Stone of Retaliation because of its stronger magic power? The reason the Chaos Beasts modified the God's Stone was actually to reduce its magic power and thereby turn it into a specific type of Magic Stone?"

"That's what I think."

"No, that isn't right..." She paused abruptly. "If the dark hollow results from immense magic power, why does nothing happen to the witch?"

"The witch?" Roland was stunned.

"I mean Anna!" Agatha pondered and said, "Her magic power is strong enough to activate the Sigil of God's Will twice. She is even more powerful than the God's Stone of Retaliation. Her Blackfire, however, will still be affected by the God's Stone, and she cannot neutralize the magic power in her vicinity. It doesn't make sense based on your theory..."

"Well..." Roland was silent for a moment. A reasonable explanation to Agatha's question escaped him. A God's Stone of Retaliation of the poorest quality could easily render a witch powerless. Even Anna's Blackfire, strong as it was, would succumb to such a disturbance. Besides, Anna's magic power was shaped like a solid metal cube in the misty world, completely different from

the hollow black hole.

"Another question. Why can magic stones only be activated by magic power?" Agatha went on. "Even the magic power has become less intense, and the amount of the power left in the stone shouldn't have been reduced. In fact, common people cannot operate the stone at all. The Quest Society has also confirmed that the magic power in the magic stone is not transferable. Therefore, magic stones cannot be used as resources." She paused for a moment and then continued, "My supervisor believed only living beings can retain magic power. Magic power just won't work on dead organisms. Its proof is witches' and demons' blood. Most researchers thought so. I don't mind you overturning their conclusion, but magic stones are no different from ordinary gems before they're charged with magic power or become sigils."

Roland was silent. It seemed his assumption about magic power intensity was a bit irrational. The Thunder of the Magic Power, however, which looked like black light, was so similar to the God's Stone that there must be some connections between the two entities... What else had he overlooked?

It was a pity there weren't any reliable observation or analyzing methods in this era. The only way to study magic power was through witches' abilities or via Stone of Measuring. Even so, what he would learn through this method was merely a very generic description of the features of magic power, which was hardly helpful to further research.

Roland thought for a while and finally decided to set the matter aside for the time being, hoping he would be able to find an answer

during the sigil manufacture process afterwards.

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Three days later, the plan for the "melting point" operation was prepared. Roland sent off the soldiers at the dock in person.

This was the first military operation on a big scale where witches acted as chief combatants. There were two ships in total, both of which were filled with experienced veterans from the First Army. Brian was the captain. These soldiers all had fought with demonist beasts with Roland upon the city wall before, and fully respected and trusted their lord. When Roland was screening them, he had stressed over and over again that the enemy would be very likely an extremely fierce monster, even more dangerous than demonic hybrids. He had emphasized that anyone who did not wish to participate in the mission could speak up. Nobody had quitted, however, and Nightingale also confirmed that all of them made their decisions at their free will.

Despite their resolution and courage, Roland did not overestimate the fighting capacity of these hundred soldiers he was forced to choose, for people in this world naturally feared demons from the bottoms of their hearts. Unlike him, who had seen all kinds of violent scenes on television or in the cinema and would not be surprised by any ferocious monsters, these ordinary people would be horrified. The memory of this upcoming battle would possibly become a nightmare they would remember for the rest of their lives.

As such, the carefully selected soldiers would not directly

participate in fighting, but would protect along the river two or three miles away from the actual battlefield. They would only take action if the witches were forced to retreat in the event of an accident.

The witches Roland selected were the most powerful ones in the City of Neverwinter, including Anna, Nightingale, Wendy, Leaf, Agatha, Sylvie, Iffy, Lightning and Maggie. According to Agatha, such a combination might be even more than enough to kill the Lord of Hell.

"Stay safe. Your personal security is your top priority." Roland remarked gravely. "You don't have to complete the mission. I'll wait for you all at the castle."

Anna went up to hug him. "Don't worry. I'll protect them."

"Me too, Your Majesty."

"Coo!"

The little girl and the pigeon hugged Roland, as well.

In the end, everybody hugged Roland except Agatha and Iffy.

Agatha snorted and muttered to herself. "It's just a simple hunting operation, not goodbye forever. If we bid farewell like you guys just did in Taquila prior to every departure, demons would have been right under your noses long before."



Iffy, on the other hand, was astounded. It was her first time to hear such a "casual" order—"You don't have to complete the mission but just need to come back home safely"—His Majesty was too lenient with witches. Was it not considered an encouragement of cowardice? When she was in the Bloodfang Association, she viewed every battle as a fight to the death. Indeed, there had unfortunately been a few combat witches killed in action during the past several years. The witches who had been unable to complete the master's tasks were severely punished, and were even regarded as useless by the Association members. Roland Wimbledon, however, appeared to carry a totally different attitude toward witches.

He treated witches neither as beasts nor lambs, but simply as "human beings".

...

Strands of smoke escaped from the chimney and with a whistle, the paddle steamer slowly thrust itself forward and took off.

Suddenly, Roland felt a pair of invisible hands holding his face. They were cold but soft.

"Take good care of yourself when I'm away. Don't leave the castle randomly." A familiar voice whispered in his ear. "I'll be back soon."

After, he felt something had lightly touched his lips.

Entirely different from the sensation on the face, the touch was a little sweet and wet. Above all, it was warm.

It was a fugitive and illusionary kiss. When Roland finally realized what had happened, he snatched at the air with his hand, only to find nothing was there.

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As the steam-powered boat was far slower than the balloon, it took them nearly two days to reach the end of the Redwater River.

At the sight of the towering snowcap, the group of people was awestruck by the magnificent scene before them. As the snow on the mountain melted much slower than that in the forest, the snow water had been accumulating for months. The water ran straight down from the precipice and branched off into various streams upon the projected rocks. From a distance, those streams looked like multiple thin and feeble threads. Upon further exploration, however, they found the streams were as broad as rivers. The water roared and thundered when it flowed into the lake at the foot of the mountain.

Obviously, the Redwater River was only one of the exits to the lake. Otherwise, the river would overflow due to the surging water.

After a night's rest, the hydrogen balloon rose into the air as it was inflated. In the meantime, the fleet also retreated somewhere

three kilometers away from the bank and started to build a defensive front along the river.

The "melting point" operation officially began.

# Chapter 548: Ensnaring the Demons

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The Farsight carried Wendy and Sylvie to the Swirling Sea, while Lightning and Maggie hovered on each side of the basket, waiting to fetch them whenever needed.

Since their mission was not to investigate the Devil's Town, they did not fly too high. As soon as they flew over the snowcap, Sylvie could look straight through the rocks and cliffs along the bank and catch sight of the Eye Demon on the top of the Blackstone Pagoda.

According to Agatha, Eye Demons did not need to really "see" people, because they could sense and locate their enemies upon being noticed. Nobody could possibly escape their scrutiny, neither the invisible nor the ones descending from the sky unless blindfolded. Because of this, eye demons had caused a great number of casualties among the commando of the Blessed Army.

Another option was to restrain from looking at eye demons. However, this was fairly hard to achieve due to the fact that eye demons normally stood at the highest point of the campgrounds.

"How did things go? Did you see it?" Lightning flew over to ask Sylvie.

"I need to get a bit closer, otherwise I can't hold up well," Sylvie answered while rubbing her eyes. It took her a lot of magic power to look through obstacles with the Eye of Magic. Her sight was

largely restricted, too. Although she had cautiously managed to reduce her vision to a straight line of sight, she still felt quite dizzy when she captured the details of the fractured precipice.

"I see." Wendy summoned a gust of wind. "Hold on."

As the rocks gradually got clearer, the thin red mist slowly entered their sights. Although it was a clear day, a cloud of mist still lingered around the cliff, except that it was a lighter color than the last time they had seen it.

Sylvie fixed her eyes once again on the mist. This time, she was finally able to see some earth through the dense mist. A few edifices shaped like towers loomed against the red mist, and the whole scene was like a deserted land.

She soon spotted the biggest black stone spire.

Compared with the random intrusion last time, the operation this time was carefully planned. They would first startle demons and then induce them to launch an attack. Unlike Lightning who was always airy and energetic, Sylvie just wanted to live an ordinary life. By no means, she wanted to be an explorer. However, as she was destined to fight the Battle of Divine Will, there was no way for her to stand by no matter how much she hated wars. Just like she had promised Tilly to come to Border Town for the purpose of checking whether Roland was manipulated by witches, she obeyed the order in the same way when Roland disclosed his attacking plan without much hesitation.

She had come to check upon Roland for the benefits of all the witches on Sleeping Island. Now she fought for the Witch Union and the entire Kingdom of His Majesty's.

Sylvie took a deep breath and moved her sight upward.

In an instant, hundreds of eyeballs came into her view. The black jelly-like monster was still sitting at its usual spot. Its body had fused with the tower top as if it had grown out of the stone. All of its eyeballs turned to Sylvie simultaneously. She could even catch a glimpse of her own face in those black gleamy eyeballs!

For a second, all her hair stood up on its end, and a chill went down her spine.

"They're coming!" She withdrew her power and shouted aloud.

"Let's go!"

"Aw!" Maggie immediately turned into a gigantic devilbeast and paused below the basket. Sylvie jumped off the basket and landed firmly on Maggie's broad back, while Lightning carried Wendy on her back and flew toward the Misty Forest. Unlike the last trip where they had been panicked and frightened, this time they were fully prepared. According to the plan, Lightning would return to where the empty hydrogen balloon was alone and further lure the demons into their traps.

Meanwhile, Sylvie turned around and looked back.

Five black dots emerged on the cliff. This number was higher than what Agatha had predicted, but it was still within the safe limit.

Nevertheless, she noticed something unusual with the help of the Eye of Magic.

Out of the five enemies, only four rode devilbeasts, and two of them were very different from regular mad demons. They did not have a big body build, nor did they have strong arms. They were not wearing animal skins or armors as mad demons usually did either, but were in a colorful cope that glowed like a rainbow. Sylvie could not figure out what the cope was made of at first glance. However, she could see something swarming and wriggling underneath the cope like numerous vipers.

The heads of the two demons were bigger than those of regular mad demons. Yet, their eyes and noses were not distinctive. Their faces were the creepiest kinds she had ever seen. They looked like two big scars, with red furrows and ridges extending from the center.

When she rested her eyes on the last demon, Sylvie was stunned.

The demon was wearing a weighty but delicate armor, with a giant heavy sword on his back. Nonetheless, he was not slow in the slightest but flew right after the four devilbeasts.

His face was totally covered by a helmet. Unlike the skull helmet

mad demons normally wore, this particular helmet was made of metal, in perfect match with his armor. On both sides of the helmet engraved sophisticated patterns. Several sharp horns, which looked like Blackstone Pagodas at first sight, stuck out from the top. The part where his eyes should be was gleaming with red light, making the demon look vicious and aggressive.

"What kind of demon is he?" thought Sylvie.

Sylvie was taken by fright and horror. As Agatha had never told her how to cope with this situation, she wondered whether she should still follow the original plan.

Sylvie felt terribly uneasy.

She followed Wendy to the deep forest. When she descended from Maggie's back, she saw a golden figure sprang up into the air and flew toward the balloon at a tremendous speed.

It was impossible for her to stop Lightning.

After some hesitation, Sylvie felt necessary to inform Agatha of the news. She patted Maggie on her wings and said, "Take me to the ambush area!"

"What's wrong?" Wendy trotted to her. "Don't we need to meet with the First Army next?"

They had been instructed during the maneuver to leave the main



battlefield and meet with the First Army as soon as possible after successfully luring demons into the ambush, given that they two were not strong enough to compete against demons.

"I saw some strange demons." Sylvie shook her head. "The enemies are not only mad demons. I've got to tell everybody!"

"But the ambush area is pretty large, aw!" Maggie threw herself flat on her face. "It may take you a while to find them even if you go."

"That's fine. Just take me there." She returned to the beast's back and turned to Wendy. "You go meet with the Army at the riverbank. I'll be right back."

...

Lightning flew as fast as she could. The wind whistled in her ears. She saw the earth, woods, rivers and beaches below quickly shrink and obscure, turning into various color blocks and distorted lines.

She must get back to where the hydrogen balloon was before the demons did so. In order to attract the enemies' attention, she had to pretend to be fleeing in a hurry.

When the vast ocean gradually came into her view, she finally caught sight of the Farsight, as well as the demons.

# Chapter 549: Agatha's Decision

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Lightning flew to the bottom of the balloon, found the powder sac affixed to the airbag and pulled out the fuse. Upon seeing the white smoke exiting the powder sac, she immediately flew straight towards the sea.

It was a simple self-destruct device. Once the enemies began following the balloon, the decoys must destroy the "Farsight" to avoid an embarrassing situation where the demons became too occupied by the novel device instead of chasing the witches.

There was a loud explosion just as Lightning touched sea. With a flash, the sky lit up.

Lightning looked up and saw the airbag puff up and become a huge red fireball with a bright orange color in the middle with dark red smoke rolling on the edges. The flames, like the setting sun, stayed ablaze for quite a long time.

She watched a demon come too close to the roaring flames. It flipped over and set itself on fire before falling to the sea with its mount.

The other four demons, who fled from the smoke below, sprang up toward Lightning.

Until now, everything had been going as planned.

The demons were not that clever after all.

Lightning raised the corner of her mouth and flew close to the sea towards the forest.

The plan was to lead them to the depth of the woods where Leaf could control everything.

Everything was ready in the hunting ground, and Leaf was waiting quietly for the demons to fall into the trap.

The dense branches, vines and saw grass would inevitably be a nightmare for the enemies

—if they could dream.

...

Sylvie used the Eye of Magic to search the ambush area. The woods under Leaf's control glowed green. From the sky, it was like a flask had embedded in the earth with its mouth facing toward the Swirling Sea while its neck remained several kilometers away.

Despite feeling dizzy, she scanned the inner part of every tree. The numerous details swarming around her head caused great pain. Sylvie finally found Agatha who hid in a large tree close to the mouth of the flask.

"Why did you come here?" The trunk cracked open as Maggie fell to the earth. Agatha poked out her head and asked, "Was the plan for enticing demons unsuccessful?"

"No, it worked. Five demons followed." She jumped down from the mount's back and lifted the white-haired little girl who had returned to her human form. Sylvie hid in the tree hastily. "But three of them are different!"

"What's the difference?"

Sylvie detailed the odd demons she had seen and found Agatha in shock.

Her heart sank. "Are they difficult to deal with?"

Agatha took a long time to recollect herself and then said with an anxious look. "The demons with ropes are Fearsome Demons, they are horrible killers to common people. But witches don't need to fear them, as long as we avoid looking them in the eye. Underneath their charred face hides the real eyes of Fearsome Demons."

"I see," Sylvie muttered. In ancient witches' stories, their enemies would be terrified immediately by these demons and then they would feel afraid, timid, confused and desperate. A mortal troop of around 100 men could often be routed by only three or four fearsome demons. Most people were too fearful to think. They just knelt down in tremor waiting to be slain. Even if the God's Stone of Retaliation could weaken this effect greatly, it could not remove

such feelings completely. The demons seemed to be born with this ability to control people's emotions, and no obvious fluctuation of their magic power could be perceived.

"What about the Armored Demon? It can fly alone, is it the Lord of Hell?"

"No!" Agatha spoke in a rough low voice. "If your description is correct, my guess is that it's probably a Senior Demon. We're in trouble."

"Senior Demon?" Sylvie was bewildered.

"The Union knows little about them, except that they possess many abilities and look like humans, except they are much larger. Both their strength and magic power are quite strong." She swallowed hard. "It's said that only Transcendents can compete against them."

"Transcendents? We don't even have an Extraordinary now." Sylvie was nervous. "Inform Leaf to stop this plan. We should retreat and meet the First Army."

Agatha bit her lip. "It can fly alone because of the Stone of Flight. In fact, it's not a big problem if there's only Lightning and Maggie because they can fly. However, we're impossible to escape from their attack once we're out of Leaf's protection. Although I've never seen a real Senior Demon, I was told by Alice before that witches must be concentrated on fighting with these crafty and strong demons, or we're likely to die because of just a tiny miss."

She beat the trunk until Leaf's voice came from above. "I'm listening. What's up?"

Agatha said firmly, "The plan has changed. Please inform all the witches we are changing from plan A to plan B. Let Nightingale watch over the Armored Demon. Don't hesitate to kill it if Anna gets the chance."

Plan B meant dropping the plan of capturing and using the Sigil of God's Will to wipe out all the enemies.

"Will we really combat with the Senior Demon?" Sylvie could not help holding Maggie tight.

"Escape only leads to death while there will be a chance to survive if we try our best to combat with them." Agatha spoke slowly. "A Senior Demon always comes out with a number of other demons, but now they just have two Fearsome Demons as the guards. So we are likely to win even if there isn't a Transcendent!"

"I see Lightning," Leaf said again. "They're coming."

"Shh..."

Sylvie held her breath. She heard roaring sounds from the treetop, and then she heard heavy objects falling to the ground in front.

The sounds of the demons' rapid paces echoed in the jungle, and soon died away. Only the Devilbeasts' low roar remained.

"How is it going now?"

"The Armored Demon hasn't landed yet and it's still following Lightning. The other demons left their mounts outside the woods and followed her too. Wait! A demon is missing." Sylvie looked carefully at the surroundings. "There were only three Devilbeasts left near us."

"Good! Let me kill these fool reptiles first so that they can't escape even if they want to." Agatha opened the crack. "You're not a combat-witch. Please just stay hidden here."

"But they can fly!" Sylvie worried. "What if they want to escape by flying?"

"Take it easy." She looked at the little girl who wanted to join. "Don't worry. We have Maggie."

...

A "Devilbeast" suddenly fell from the sky, appeared behind them, spread its wings while rotating its tail and roared loudly at the three Devilbeasts.

They were distracted immediately.

To Sylvie's surprise, the three Devilbeasts imitated Maggie and also spread their wings and wagged their tails, as if they were dancing! In order to gain more performance space, they pushed each other and refused to back off.

Were they entertaining her?

On the other side, Agatha snuck out of the forest. A layer of white ice crystal formed on the ground.



# Chapter 550: The Slaughter

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It was Sylvie's first time seeing such an incredible method of movement.

As Agatha moved, a mirror-like road, paved by crystal ice, would appear just ahead of her. She seemed to be floating along the road, almost as if the ground was pushing her forward. In a flash, she had arrived at the rear of the first Devilbeast.

When Agatha stretched out her hands, the frost suddenly appeared around the grassland and it even started to snow! After a moment, the Devilbeast gave out a shriek and it tried to fly, only to find it could not move at all. Each of its four strong limbs had been frozen in place and the ice crystals continued to move up along them, completely freezing its body and wings in no time.

Almost simultaneously, Maggie threw herself onto the back of the dancing Devilbeast and snapped at its neck with her huge crimson mouth. The Devilbeast was in such a panic and it wanted to get rid of Maggie. However, Maggie was much larger. The Devilbeast was like a baby beast that was being suppressed by a full-grown beast. Then, Maggie got a grip and broke its neck completely. At last, the Devilbeast was defeated and with a final swish of its tail, it shattered the poor frozen beast, smashing it to pieces.

At this moment, the third Devilbeast began to realize what had just happened. Although it did not understand why its kind would kill each other, he knew something bad had happened and it spread its long wings and rose into the air.

But it was too late.

Agatha followed it and also "flew".

Or rather, she was walking in the air.

The ice crystals also extended to the Devilbeast and for a while, it formed a bridge in the air. Agatha ran along the ice bridge and soon she was close enough she could use her magic power to attack this Devilbeast.

Sylvie could not help but cover her mouth in shock.

Like a swift Viper, the ice bridge froze the tail of the Devilbeast and then quickly turned the rest of it into an ice sculpture.

Probably due to the heavy weight of the frozen beast, the end of the ice bridge tilted, cracked, and then snapped. Agatha began to fall from the bridge, fortunately, Maggie caught her. However, the ice sculpture fell to the ground and broke into thousands of pieces.

It took less than 20 seconds for them to kill all three of the demonic beasts.

This was the way in which senior witches engaged in a combat!

Sylvie could not help but feel envious of Agatha.

...

"Kacha."

After checking the bullets in the barrel, Nightingale shut the cartridge.

Just then, she heard Leaf's warnings about the changes made to the enemy attacks, and that plan A for the Melting Point Action had changed to plan B.

That meant Iffy's task had been canceled and it was her turn to combat these enemies.

But, what was most important was for them to provide opportunities for Anna to discharge the Sigil of God's Will.

Nightingale could not help but recall Roland's words once she thought of Anna.

"Anyway, take her back, please."

"I'll leave it all to you."

She clutched her chest and bit her lip.

This plan should be completed with ease but she found an indescribable emotion in her heart.

As the task became increasingly tougher, the emotion became unexpectedly stronger.

"If the most terrible thing happened, that would mean Anna could also die..." she thought.

"Oh, no—unless I die." Nightingale shook her head and suppressed this horrible idea. Roland trusted her the most, so she could not let him down. Even if Roland did not instruct her to do so specifically, she would protect Anna at all costs.

In a sense, Anna was the savior of all the witches in the Witch Cooperation Association.

She would never forgive herself if Anna died because of her selfishness.

"The enemies are coming!"

Leaf gave her a warning and Nightingale gathered herself. She was ready to outflank the enemies as soon as their direction was pointed out by Leaf.

Her world of mist was commonly a desolate and dull place. Anything mundane and not related to magic power would become nothing more than twisted lines and changeable black and white

blocks. This was her first time seeing so many colors, thanks to the demons.

Beside the green forest, she could see a muted yellow arm from one of the Mad Demons and its inside emitting a shade of light blue. The other two demons should be the Fearsome Demons that Leaf had just mentioned. They had a stronger magical resonance and she could see many magic swirls inside their bodies, the one on their forehead was the most obvious.

Another Senior Demon, which they needed to keep a particularly close eye on, was not among them. If their intelligence was correct, it should be monitoring everything from above the forest.

Without a doubt, the Fearsome Demons, which would cause fear, should be the first to kill.

And, it should be done before they opened their eyes.

After the three demons passed through the ambush points, Nightingale held the gun with both hands and used her instant leap to travel more than ten meters in the twinkling of an eye. She pointed her gun at the back of the Fearsome Demon's head.

It was so close to her that she did not even have to leave her Mist. As long as she had some luck, the gun barrel would not be split in half by the powerful magic.

She immediately shot and for a moment, there was a thunderous

roar.

In the Mist, the Fearsome Demon's head abruptly puffed up, as if the unstoppable bullet had been shot from inside of its head and blown outward. Its brain exploded, spilling brain matter in all directions. Next, a hail of fog soared skyward—Nightingale noticed its red mist vessel was hidden directly inside its body.

The other Fearsome Demon turned around quickly, and its bloody scar expanded across its face, trying to reveal its fearsome eyes. Suddenly several vines shot from the top of a tree, intertwining its head and pulling its head back before the eyes could be revealed. At this moment, a Mad Demon in the front turned around at the sound of the gunshot and ended up staring at the Fearsome Demon and could not help but tremble with fear.

Nightingale shot the three remaining bullets into the Fearsome Demon which had been forcibly pulled back by Leaf. Meanwhile, Anna leaped from her hiding place in the tree and cut the beast into pieces with her black fire before the Mad Demon could recover itself from the fear.

"Be careful!"

Lightning, who had been enticing the enemies into the air, shouted.

Nightingale looked up and found that a large sword was about to slash her.

She instinctively tried to enter the Mist, but unexpectedly, her misty world was broken into pieces by the enemy who was wielding the sword.

"What's this ability? It can break my magic power?" she thought.

It was too late for her to escape. Suddenly a black curtain spread out above her head and withstood the sword's attack. Unlike an actual curtain, it seemed to have more of a mirror-like surface and she could even see her shocked expression reflected on its surface.

This is... the Blackfire!

"Bang!"

The sword hit the Blackfire fiercely and Anna looked pained, her body shaking, but her Blackfire remained intact.

Without any hesitation, this time, Nightingale caught Anna quickly and summoned the Mist again, escaping to a safe place over 20 meters away, instantly.

Meanwhile, the armored demon also slowly fell towards the ground.

The death of its partner did not seem to have any impact on it. The demon calmly lifted the large sword, engraved with a strange pattern, and suddenly the magic power surged toward the blade of the sword.

The blade gave off a dazzling glow!



# Chapter 551: The Senior Demon

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This is... the Sigil of God's Will!

Nightingale widened her eyes in surprise. But soon, she found something different. Through the Mist she saw a black hole formed in the enemy's palm instead of the characteristic dazzling light of the Magic Stones. It was not a sigil but an ability of the demon. Shining magic power was sucked into the black hole and became a fast-growing vortex which gave off such a strong light that it made it hard for the other witches to open their eyes. However, seeing it through the Mist, it was getting darker and darker.

The demon then thrust its sword into the ground, sending out a black shimmering light to cover the entire woods.

Instantly, the light of magic powers that were flickering like candlelight in the wind was put out. Nightingale's misty world was broken down again. Leaf was forced out of her Heart of Forest form and the trees promptly threw Leaf and Iffy onto the ground. Leaf was heavily injured. She was spewing blood and she was not able to stand up again.

Nightingale was shocked and she thought, "The demon sensed that the wood was Leaf!"

No... Though Leaf hid well, it was still possible to see her movements from above. The really strange thing is why could it break the magic power like the God's Stone of Retaliation?

Compared with Magic stones, the demon can release such magic power and is even more flexible in manipulating it, but there's no light when it was releasing the magic power!"

Nightingale did not have time to think about it anymore.

Enduring the discomfort after having her magic power broken off, she changed the cartridge and dashed towards the demon who was now walking to the paralyzed and defenseless Leaf after its previous black shimmering light attack.

When Nightingale came to a place about 10 meters away from the demon and was sure that she could hit it, she swiftly pulled the trigger.

The bullets hit its arm armor, creating sparkles and smoke. The demon seemed very annoyed at being disturbed by someone else at this moment. It roared in anger and then held its giant sword up in front of itself. Seeing this, Nightingale's heart sank. The bullets did not get into the demon's body through its arm to break its inner organs as she had expected. In fact, she was not sure whether the bullets had broken through the armor or not, let alone this giant sword which was as thick as a door plank.

As she had already used all the five bullets, she drew out her dagger and lunged towards the head of the demon.

In order to save Leaf, she had to try her best to stop it.

The demon promptly lifted up its sword to strike, with its eyes shining like bright red lights. Though it moved incredibly fast, Nightingale could still predict its action. She did not dodge the striking sword. Just at the moment when the blade was going to cut her in half, she disappeared in the Mist.

The demon's lightless wave could wipe out the effects of magic power in a large area, but it could not completely prohibit the magic power. After the vortex vanished, the witches could use their magic power again. Nightingale's keen eye caught this change immediately, as she had the ability to observe the flow of magic power.

In the world of black and white, she saw the giant sword's silhouette instantly distort and quickly found the "cutting point" in the blade. She slid "through" the blade and stabbed her dagger into a gap in the demon's helmet!

Surprisingly, the dagger cracked after a loud bang.

"This is... a Magic Barrier?"

"Damn it, how many kinds of abilities does it have!?" Nightingale hurriedly retreated and soon the Armored Demon caught up with her. It used one hand to raise its sword and struck again.

She played the same old trick, hoping to escape in the Mist, but this time she was not that lucky.

The demon lifted his other hand into the air.

It pull Nightingale out of the Mist, as she was moving through the sword.

When she was pulled out, part of the blade was still inside her body. As she was thrown out, blood spilled out from a long, deep wound in her waist left by the blade. Even the protective clothing that had been specially made by Soraya was torn. Nightingale gave out a choked cry. Without time to attend to the wound, she made use of the force of falling to roll backwards, hoping to dodge the demon's coming attack. Unfortunately, this demon could move over two meters with a single step. It was impossible for her to escape from such a strong enemy that moved as fast as an Extraordinary.

When the sword was about to cut Nightingale, many purple beams of the light suddenly appeared around the demon and then quickly contracted inward to tie the demon tightly.

That was Iffy's Magic Cage!

"Crush it!" Nightingale shouted.

"I can't do it!" Iffy grated. "It's too strong!" She had squeezed her hand into a fist, but the beams of the light could not contract anymore. Instead, the beams shook as if the demon was going to break them apart.

The demon gave out a deafening roar and threw up its arms. The cage split up, but before it could raise its sword again, beams of light came back to trap it once more.

"Miss An-Anna use the golden thunder now... Be quick!" Iffy said in a measured voice. It was easy to tell from her face that the cage could not trap the demon for a very long time.

However, the demon was not far away from Iffy. The golden thunder of the Sigil of God's Will would probably strike both of them.

"Now, Anna!" Nightingale shouted to Anna in a distant place. "Activate the Sigil!"

Anna caught Nightingale's eyes and immediately got what she meant. She used all her power to lift the metal sheet in her hand.

A strong bright light lit up the woods and some beams of light also came down from the sky.

The demon howled. It might have seen this kind of scene before, as now it sounded angry and at the same time frightened, struggling even harder to get free.

Nightingale knew this was their only chance to win, as the demon now could not dispel their magic power.

The golden thunder struck!

Nightingale pressed on her wound and moved into the Mist. Before the dark lightning struck on Iffy's head, she suddenly appeared behind her, held her up and leaped aside, swiftly pulling her out of the Sigil of God's Will's attack range. She saved Iffy in only two steps

The move needed not only determination and courage, but also teamwork between Nightingale and Anna.

If Anna struck in a wrong place, Nightingale and Iffy could hardly escape from the coming golden thunder.

However, Nightingale trusted her. She believed that nobody could overtake Anna in terms of magic power control,

and the result proved that Nightingale was right.

The strong golden light instantly covered the place where the Senior Demon stood and destroyed everything in the area, including the weed and vines.

Anna staggered. She finally couldn't keep her feet on the ground anymore and fell down.

"Anna!" Leaf cried out. She had just recovered a little and stumbled towards Anna.

"She's fine. She just exhausted her magic power!" said Nightingale. Every word she spoke was contorted by the searing pain caused by the wound on her waist. Luckily the inner organs were alright. As long as she avoided violent movements that would open the wound up again, it was not life-threatening.

"You... got injured? Let me bind it up for you," Iffy said. A mixed feeling was obvious on her face.

Nightingale nodded and she was about to roll up her clothing when suddenly... she froze,

seeing a black figure slowly walking out of the smoke caused by the golden thunder.

Several thorns on the demon's helmet broke, looking like collapsed stone towers. Its delicate armor was cracked and covered by dirt. It had lost an arm and the giant sword,

but it surprisingly survived the fatal strike.

The demon hissed hideously. Nightingale was not sure whether it was smiling but she could tell from its voice that it sounded excited and murderous.

Although it seemed that the demon could not move as rapidly as before and with a much dimmer red light, would fall in any minute, Nightingale still thought no one could stop it now because herself and Leaf were paralyzed, Anna fainted, Lightning was

missing and Iffy had nearly no power left.

Just at the moment, the witch beside her stood up.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Nightingale said in a low voice.

"Fight till the last moment," Iffy drew out a dagger and said. "It's the fate of a combat witch. Don't you still have some magic power left? Take them with you and hide. If you're unable to take all of them, at least, take one with you."

Nightingale suddenly thought of Roland's entrustment.

Yes... at least, I should take Anna back. That's what I've promised His Majesty. I have to do it no matter what.

A familiar howl from above suddenly interrupted Nightingale's thought.

"Aw..."

A huge shadow landed from the sky!



# Chapter 552: The Magic Slayer

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The demon looked up, and the next moment it was instantly stomped into the ground by Maggie. Nightingale felt that the strong impact even made the earth tremble a little.

And she thought that if it was an ordinary person, the impact would have definitely smashed its bones.

"Well done, Maggie! Stomp it to death!" Leaf said, clenching her hands into fists.

"Bite it! Whip it with your tail!" Iffy was so excited that she loudly shouted.

"Awh!"

Maggie howled cheerfully. She put Agatha down and was going to beat the demon again. Just at that moment, she uncontrollably transformed from a fierce Devilbeast back into a little girl, falling to sit on the ground, at a loss to understand what happened.

"It's a Magic Slayer!"

Agatha yelled. She was the first to react. She lifted up an ice spike from under the ground, which she crashed into the demon and sent it flying out, breaking several trees.

Giving the demon no chance to catch a breath, she immediately caught up with it and froze its feet.

"Now!" she shouted back at Maggie.

Maggie came to her senses and drew a pistol, aiming and firing continuously at the frozen target. Nightingale bit her lips and reloaded her gun. She asked Iffy to help her up to her feet and then walked to join Maggie. The demon's Magic Barrier shined on its armor, but it soon dimmed down. The red light in its eyes was flickering on and off.

Suddenly, it roared hoarsely and threw its hand toward Agatha and sent her flying backward without even touching her. At the same time, the ice crystals around its feet melted instantly. It jumped up and staggered, wanting to escape.

"Don't let it go!" Agatha shouted, "Maggie!"

"Let me stop it!" Leaf grabbed the Sigil of God's Will from Anna's hand. She had not consumed very much magic power in the previous fight, though she was severely injured when she was forcibly pulled out from her Heart of Forest form. During their regular tests, she was able to light up four stones of the Sigil, and now, immediately after she injected all her magic power into the Sigil, a bright golden light lit up the woods once again. The demon turned around and let out a strange sound in disbelief.

The golden thunder struck the demon again.

This time, he did not survive it.

...

"The demon is... dead?" Nightingale asked in a weak voice.

"Only half of its armor is left behind!" Maggie answered while dragging the "enemy" back. If it was not for the delicate glyph on the edge of the armor, it would be hard to believe that this charred mass was the demon itself. Apparently, it was not as strong as they had imagined.

Lightning was found, too.

When the demon released the black waving, she was affected and lost her magic power temporarily. She had fallen from above, hit her head on a branch and fainted. Luckily, as she had not been high up in the sky and the thick branches and leaves of the trees had acted as a cushion to her fall, she was not heavily injured, except for a bump on her head.

However, she still looked upset and disappointed because she missed the fight. After making sure that everybody was alright, she said, "I'll inform Brian of the situation here and ask him to send someone to fetch you."

"You survived. That's a miracle" Agatha exclaimed.

"Yeah, I don't know how to tell His Majesty that all of us got beat

up by just one demon." Nightingale heaved a sigh, enduring the pain.

"No, Nightingale. This isn't an ordinary victory. The enemy is a Magic Slayer!" Agatha shook her head and continued, "Maybe several Senior Witches could confront a Senior Demon, but they could never defeat a Magic Slayer. Only the Three Chiefs of the Union could compete with it."

"Only the Transcendents?" Leaf asked, frowning.

"Yes." Agatha confirmed and added, "The Union paid with blood for this lesson."

"What kind of ability does a Magic Slayer have?"

"Magic Slayer is just a title, instead of a certain kind of ability." Agatha explained. "Every Senior Demon has many kinds of abilities, and different from witches, demons don't have to get their abilities through awakening. Someone in the Union once witnessed a Senior Demon, who had led the enemy to attack Taquila many times, that evolved two different Magic Cyclones inside its body in merely several years. That means it gained two more abilities during that time. No one knew how it did that. The demons seem to be more naturally talented than us in manipulating the magic power."

A Magic Slayer doesn't refer to a demon with certain kinds of Magic Cyclones, but refers to an extremely powerful Senior Demon, who can release power to create the effects similar to those

of a God's Stone."

The last sentence from Agatha made Nightingale's heart skip a beat. "You mean... it can prohibit magic power?" she asked.

"To be more accurate, it interferes with magic power." Agatha corrected her and continued, "The Magic Slayer is able to break through the defense of the God's Stone of Retaliation and can obstruct or diminish the magic power attacks. They can also dispel or stop magic power effects. They're really tough opponents for all the witches."

"I... don't understand." Iffy was confused and asked, "Why is that not a special ability?"

"It's not," Agatha answered. "Take Anna for example. If she was a Magic Slayer, her Blackfire will remain effective even under the influence of the God's Stone of Retaliation, and at the same time, the place affected by Blackfire will become an interference region. That means, the other magic power effects near the Blackfire will be wiped out unless Anna's opponent is another Magic Slayer."

What Agatha said immediately reminded Nightingale of the demon's lightless black hole. She recalled the whole process of the previous battle, and remembered that there was only the dim shadow around the demon when she hit on its Magic Barrier and was caught by it in the Mist. She was surprised to find that the demon attacked as if it was the Sigil of God's Will, giving out absolutely no magic power light during the fighting.

She told Agatha what she had seen through the Mist during the fight and then asked, "That's why the first strike of the Sigil of God's Will didn't kill it?"

"Probably," Agatha shrugged and said. "But I'm not sure. This is the first time for me to encounter this kind of demon and the Union left no record about using the Sigil of God's Will to fight against a Magic Slayer."

"So the Chiefs of the Union depended completely on their own power to defeat the Magic Slayer?"

"Exactly," Agatha said while nodding. "Extraordinaries are really powerful, especially when they wear the God's Stone of Retaliation. They shine like the sun in the battlefields. Wherever they go, demons would melt like the snow in the spring, and Transcendents are the center of the sun. If you could see Lord Alice in a fight, you would be overwhelmed by her power."

Hearing that, Nightingale was deep in thought, "Counting all the Chiefs of the Union, there were only three Transcendents." She then asked, "No witch of the Union had become a Magic Slayer before?"

"As far as I know, no," Agatha answered, "and no one will. Witches and demons have fundamental differences. Numerous demons can evolve into Mad Demons, but not many of us can become someone like Alice, no matter how hard we practice."

Maggie, who kept fiddling with the demon's armor, found a little

black box from the remains of the demon and said, "Look! What's this?"

Agatha took the box and tried to open it. "It's locked."

"Let me try." Nightingale observed the square metal box through the Mist and when its silhouette was distorting, she put her fingers into it and grabbed the contents out of the box.

Several glittering stones fell out of the air.

# Chapter 553: The Trophy

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"Gems? Coo!" Maggie parted the white hair covering her forehead to reveal her curious eyes.

"They're Magic Stones," said Agatha. She picked the stones up to take a closer look and added, "I've no idea what kinds of Magic Stones they are, but judging from their color, they must be high-quality God's Stones of Retaliation before being changed into Magic Stones by the Chaos Beast."

"The trophy we get from a Senior Demon must be something good," Leaf said while smiling. "I'm just surprised that it hid the box inside its body."

"Oh, you remind me. Are there boxes like this one in the other dead demons' bodies? Coo! I'll go and check!" Maggie said excitedly.

"Watch out for the tanks restoring the Red Mist!" Agatha warned.

In less than ten minutes, Maggie came back with two black boxes in her hands and said, "I found them in the demons wearing colorful clothes."

Nightingale pulled some Magic Stones out from the two boxes though they were dimmer and smaller than the stones of the first box.



Agatha gathered all the Magic Stones together and then could not help but frown.

"Is there anything wrong?" asked Nightingale.

"It seems that there are too many Magic Stones," Agatha answered.

"Isn't it a happy thing for you to get so many of them?" asked Nightingale.

Agatha shook her head slightly and explained, "The Union killed thousands of Fearsome Demons, but it was still hard to collect Magic Stones. That's why the Quest Society did everything to capture and raise Chaos Beasts. Why do they carry so many Magic Stones?"

"Maybe that's their savings, accumulated in over 400 years? It's just like an unlucky guy who pooled all his savings, hoping to start a peaceful life in his hometown, but got killed and robbed by us on the way." Nightingale suggested with a strained smile.

However, no one laughed. All of them knew clearly that if the numerous demons had been producing Magic Stones in the past 400 years, they now must have an incredible amount of war resources.

To break the dead silence, Agatha said, "Well, it's no use thinking too much. After all, we have to fight against them anyway.

There're no two ways about it."

...

Guided by Lightning, the First Army finally arrived at the woods.

"Are you alright?" Wendy hurriedly jumped off Lightning's back to check the witches one by one. "Anna..."

"Don't worry. She just fainted because of magic power exhaustion." Nightingale comforted Wendy. "Everybody is alright."

"I've told her, but she just kept rushing me," said Lightning. Her head had been wrapped up, and only several wisps of hair could be seen on her forehead.

"Wh-What are these? Are they demons?" Brian asked in shock, looking at the bodies put in a row on the ground.

"Yes, dead demons. You have to tell your soldiers to bring them back, including their remains, armors, clothes and weapons. None of those things should be left behind. That's His Majesty's order." Nightingale shrugged and said.

"Yes! I'll take care of this." Brian's face suddenly hardened, hearing the order.

"What a pity! We didn't catch a demon alive. The plan to make

Sigils has to be postponed again." Agatha said with a sigh.

"A living demon? There's probably one." Lightning tilted her head and said.

"What? Where?" All the people simultaneously turned to look at Lightning.

"I'm not sure, but if the demon can swim, maybe it's still alive," she said while blinking.

...

In the afternoon, the paddle steamers left the harbor and turned back to sail towards the City of Neverwinter.

The curious and surprised soldiers of the First Army crowded on the deck of a steamer.

"This is the enemy that we're going to fight against in the future?"

"It looks just so-so, except the huge, intimidating figure."

"Hush! What did you say? Haven't you seen that even His Majesty's powerful witches were heavily injured. Don't you know how powerful they are?" Someone interrupted.

"Yes, those dead demons must be fierce, at least, much tougher than the demonic beasts. Even the powerful lady Anna fainted." Another one added, "Yeah, she was the one who sealed the breach in the city wall and blocked a large group of demonic beasts on her own."

The other soldiers agreed.

"Yeah... I was there too. Lady Anna saved my life!"

"If it wasn't her, I'd already be stomped to death by the demonic boars."

"Unfortunately, Miss Angel isn't here. Otherwise, they would have been cured right now."

Hearing what the soldiers said, Nightingale and Agatha standing at the stern of the steamer looked at each other and then shook their heads with a smile.

Both of them found what they heard very incredible. Since she came from the time when the witches had ruled the human world and enslaved the common people, Agatha had a brand new feeling towards the ordinary people when she heard that they considered witches comrades-in-arms. Nightingale who had had to hide from the ordinary people for a very long time and had suffered from the coercion of the church also felt for the first time that the ordinary people were able to accept the witches and even willing to fight side by side with them.

"What do you think about it?" Nightingale asked.

"You mean the test target? I think we were so lucky to capture it alive when we believed that we were going back empty-handed." Agatha said with a smile.

The test target, the living Mad Demon locked in an iron cage attracted the soldiers to flock to have a look at it.

According to Lightning, the flames from the explosion of the hydrogen balloon hurt and battered this unlucky demon unconscious causing it to fall into the water. After it regained consciousness, it had struggled for half a day, trying to swim to the bank but had failed since it had been so badly injured. In the end, it was caught by Maggie who said that the Mad Demon must have mistaken her for a Devilbeast thinking that it had come to its rescue and had cried out loudly to catch her attention. It never expected that it would become the witches' captive.

As Iffy was pushed to the limit of her magic power and physical strength, she probably could not trap the demon for a very long time. After discussion, the witches decided to cut all its limbs and let Agatha freeze the wounds. By doing so, the demon could neither kill itself nor die before it used up the Red Mist.

"It's hard to believe that we can still complete the task after the sudden, terrible accident. We're so lucky." Nightingale twitched her mouth and said.

"Oh, don't you need some rest?" Agatha asked, pointing at her

waist.

"It's fine after the herbal treatment. Before we met His Majesty Roland, Leaf took care of the wounds for all the sisters in the Witch Cooperation Association." Nightingale said lightly while throwing up her hands.

"I'm not prudent enough in this action. Fortunately, everyone is fine." Agatha said and heaved a sigh.

"You mean the Senior Demons? That's not your fault. No one could predict that they would appear in this remote place." Nightingale consoled her.

"And that's what makes me confused... The Senior Demons have never acted alone. They usually hid behind a huge army of demons and they were a few in number. During the decades of the battle, the Union had recorded all of the Senior Demons that appeared. There were less than 20 of them, including those killed in the battle." Agatha paused for a while and continued. "I thought I had to wait until the Bloody Moon came to see them, but now I'm not sure, after seeing the Magic Stones."

Nightingale soon got what she meant and that idea sent a chill to her heart.

"The demons' lifespan, growth limit, evolution way and reproduction way still remain unknown to us. What did they do in the past 400 years? Assuming they've accumulated so many Magic Stones, is it possible that they may also have many more Senior

Demons now?"

# Chapter 554: Reaching the City of Neverwinter

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"There are so many boats here,"

Edith thought, lying beside the porthole of the poop deck. She glanced over to see the fleets that were coming and going on the Redwater River.

Since she entered the Western Region, she noticed that many strange Concrete Boats were sailing on the river with no wind sail, making the stream a very crowded one. And according to shipmaster's introduction, they were called paddle steamers. They relied on steam power to march forward and their speed could not be influenced by the wind. It was said that even if you sail upstream, they were faster than the sailing ship. A paddle steamer usually marched in front of other boats on the river with a string of black smoke lagging behind. No one could clearly explain how the steam pushed the big wooden wheel on both sides of the boat.

While one thing was certain, these things were made in the City of Neverwinter.

Edith secretly made some estimates that almost every hour there would be one paddle steamer passing by. If it was cargo that these ships carried, then there was no doubt that the amount of material the City of Neverwinter was importing would be astonishing. She learned from businessmen that a city could not be



bigger than its ability to import materials. You could get a rough idea about how prosperous this city was and how many business opportunities it could offer, if you just stayed for a couple of days on the city's main road. You would even know what the most popular goods of the city were if you were good at communication.

Obviously, the Redwater River was the most important main road for the Western Region.

And watching this busy stream way, she believed all the propaganda she had seen in the king's city might be more than just Roland, His Majesty's brag.

In such a short time, Roland had integrated the Western Region into one new city whose permanent population and commercial trade had outperformed the old king's city. Such an outstanding heir to the throne actually had a bad reputation of being ignorant and stubborn... Thinking of these rumors, Edith was more interested in Roland Wimbledon.

"Miss Conrad, are you observing the boat again?" The door was pushed open, a well-dressed, brown-haired, handsome man walked in. "Want to go out to breathe some fresh air? You must be bored of staying here all the time?"

"No, this place is nice." Edith stood up and nodded to him. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You don't need to thank me," he laughed and said, "I'm lucky to have such a beautiful lady's company."

Edith had heard too much of these kinds of compliments, but she still replied with a delightful look, "Without your help, I'm afraid I may have had to crash with the cargo and refugees."

"Of course I couldn't stand by and let this kind of things happen," the man sat opposite and said. "There's no one jeweler who's willing to let jewelry be covered with dust, and you're just like jewelry to me."

This man was Victor, the owner of the Everspring boat. He was a jeweler from the king's city. After their original boat was burnt, Edith quickly picked out this two-master ship from all the ships that traveled to the Western Region. It was not a passenger boat, neither did it accept any employment. It was Victor's private ship. But for the Pearl of the Northern Region, as long as the ship-owner was a male, everything was fine.

She pretended to be a noble lady from the Northern Region, who came to the Western Region to find her missing relatives. With a couple of words, she made Victor feel sorry for her and invite her aboard the Everspring voluntarily. Compared with the common miniature sailing boats and freighters, the Everspring was spacious and bright, with a comfortable passenger cabin in the poop deck. Besides, it did not have the odors of the rotten wood that were caused by the longtime aquatic travel. Victor even arranged two servants for her, without charging a single gold royal from her.

Of course, the only price she needed to pay was to endure Victor's visits from time to time, showing his generosity and concern, but for Edith, who had been good at running around the circles of the

noble, it was just a piece of cake, as she had already gotten used to it. And if he was good enough, she would enjoy the feeling of controlling him.

"Although these ships can sail without the push of the wind, it's all too crude," Victor said and poured a cup of black tea for himself. "I've boarded a paddle steamer and carefully observed it, it's noisy and shaking when sailing... it may be a good choice for transporting goods, but not the best choice for a long journey."

"Of course it won't be as comfortable as the Everspring," Edith laughed and said, "but why do I feel that these boats just popped out in a night? There weren't such kinds of boats in the Western Region before, I suppose?"

"Yes, you're right. They just sprang up overnight," Victor twitched his lips and added, "I used to travel for businesses to Longsong Stronghold and there weren't these kinds of strange things back then. After just a winter, they're everywhere now."

"Making 20 or 30 paddle steamers in one winter?" Edith thought in surprise. As the heir of the Kant Family, she knew exactly what the meaning of it was. Since a big city needed to import a lot of material, the city expansion was limited by the ability of its transportation ability for material. These kinds of non-sailing boats which could be produced so quickly were obviously good to improve the city's transportation ability, as they could continually transport food and commodities from everywhere to the Western Region. Given that, the expansion speed of the City of Neverwinter would naturally be beyond everyone's imagination.

As for the noises and shaking, it was not worthy of mention.

"Look, Miss Conrad, no need to worry about those ugly Concrete Boats. I have something more interesting here. It may help you to kill the time." Victor called the maid beside him, whispering a few words in her ear and then she nodded, turned around and left the room.

"What's it?"

"Something that can match with your beauty," he gloated and said, "it's also my old profession."

The maid quickly came back to the poop deck with an exquisite album in her hand. Victor spread it out in front of Edith. "Which one do you like?"

There were many dazzling crystal pictures on the parchment, which were definitely lifelike, with fine brushwork and bright colors. Obviously, the painter that made this album was an expert in doing his job.

"Are these... gems?"

"Precisely, they're rough stones." Victor explained to her patiently. "I set the prices in accordance with the album's standard when I purchased them. Compared with the polished jewelry, the rough stones have their own charms... If you're interested in any kind of rough stones, please let me know. Of course, if you prefer

the polished jewelry, I could ask some jewelers to use these rough stones to make some jewelry for you when I get back to the king's city."

Nothing original, Edith just flipped over the album and then gave it back to him. "Thanks, but no."

Victor was surprised when he got the book. "So aren't you interested in these at all?"

"My relatives are missing. I don't have the mood to pick these luxury gifts. Please forgive me," Edith answered in a low voice. If she promised him now, he would pester her when they arrived in the City of Neverwinter, which would be a hindrance. Although most of the females would give in to these sparkling things, she would rather appreciate the steam engine that drove the paddle steamer. Compared with the jewelry which only spread among the nobles, those were much more valuable.

...

Soon after Victor left, there came a series of deep and rich ringing sounds from the direction of the bow... It seemed that a big fleet was about to leave the harbor.

Looking to the harbor, Edith could see the bulk head line becoming clearer and clearer in front of her.

# Chapter 555: The Beginning of the Negotiation

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So this is Border Town... no, City of Neverwinter?

Edith could not help but feel surprised, seeing the busy and orderly scene in front of her after walking down the gangway ladder. She had had many assumptions prior to her arrival, but found that she had belittled this city. The harbor was three times bigger than that of the king's city. One side of the dock was crowded with sailing ships and concrete boats, busy unloading cargo. Mountains of minerals and coals were heaped up in the yard.

On the other side of the dock, 10 paddle steamers were departing in a row from the trestle. Many citizens stood beside the shore to see them off. All the crews wore uniforms, standing in straight lines along both sides of the boat. Edith could feel their high morale. There was a kind of expression on their faces, the same kind that appeared on knights' faces when they came back after defeating their enemies. Yet there was no doubt, these people were definitely not the noble.

The center of the dock was the gathering place for businessmen, refugees and migrants, most of whom had arrived via various types of sailing vessels. After they disembarked, they were separated by a group of men in black. They were asked to stand in line to pass the barrier after the examination. The floating population in the dock area was over 1,000. Even the king's city was overshadowed by such a splendid scene.

"The dock has grown longer again." Victor commented with surprise. "Does His Majesty plan to turn the whole river bank into the dock area?"

"Again?" Edith noticed his words.

"The dock wasn't this wide last autumn," he opened his arms and said. "There weren't so many people, either."

"What're they doing in the barrier, taking taxes?"

"There're no downtown taxes here. You need to pay taxes only when you have sold out your commodities," Victor enthusiastically explained. "Besides, in the downtown, people are not allowed to set up stalls unofficially. All transactions must take place in the Convenience Market. Those men in black act as patrol teams for the other cities. They set a barrier to register people's identities and to eliminate demonic plague."

"Not to blackmail?" Edith asked and winked at her brother who nodded and took out his wallet, ready to give money to pull strings.

"No, no, Miss Conrad, I said they're just like a patrol team." The jeweler, Victor laughed and waved his hand. "In fact, they never charge extra money. I know it's hard to believe, but this is the truth. I was as surprised as you when I passed the examination for the first time. Come with me. It's quicker to take the businessman pass."

Just as Victor had described, after the men in black verified his identity, they let them all pass the barrier without charging even one bronze royal.

"I need to find a clean and comfortable hotel to check in, and then I'm going to pop into the Convenience Market," Victor said and turned around. "What about you, Miss Conrad? If you're unfamiliar with this place, I'm at your service."

"Thank you." Edith put on a grateful look, lifted her skirt and bowed, saying, "You've done me many courtesies during this journey. That's enough. I'll go to the City Hall to ask for help. I should be able to get some information about my relatives there."

"It takes no effort, My Lady. Besides, it's my pleasure to know a distinguished noble woman like you. Please don't mention it."

After several evasions, Edith finally got rid of Victor, but the businessman continued to wave at her while leaving. He said if they were in any trouble, they could go to the Holy Mountain Hotel to find him anytime.

"Sister, how popular you are." Cole smacked his lips.

"Hmm?" Edith glanced at him. "What should you call me?"

"Ugh, well, Miss Edith." The Duke's second son could not help shuddering. "Shall we find a hotel and check in?"



"No, we should go to the castle to hand over the document," she said without hesitation. "We should get in contact with His Majesty as soon as possible."

"But we don't have the heads anymore." Cole reminded her in a low voice.

"Then we'll do things under no-head circumstances." Edith shrugged. "Remember the things I've told you? Show our sincerity and the two heads alone won't represent the Kant family's loyalty."

Besides, even if we did have the heads, they would likely be rotten and smelly by now. It was not a good idea to offer two rotten heads to His Majesty. Everything had deviated from its original track since His Majesty left the king's city.

What we did next depends on the specific situation. In the end, it would be the negotiator's ability that determined the negotiation result.

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"Your Majesty, an emissary delegate from the Northern Region is waiting outside the castle, and they want to see you," guard Sean walked into the office and reported. "The leader claimed to be Cole Kant, the second son of Calvin Kant, the present Duke of the Northern Region. Mr. Barov has already verified their voucher document and emblem. They weren't forged."

"The Northern Region?" Startled, Roland put down the design drawings. "Wasn't that Timothy's territory? Have they stated their intentions?"

"Yes, Sir Cole said that the Duke is willing to pledge his loyalty to you." the guard answered with excitement.

"Voluntarily pledge his loyalty..." Roland frowned at this news. It was a nuisance, for he did not need a federal Lord's loyalty. It offered no help in the development of the country and would have an impact on the present centralized system. Roland actually wished they would stay in their domain with a sense of chance, waiting for him to eliminate them all. Only when the old forces were completely annihilated, could the new centralization of authority be built up smoothly.

However, he could not just refuse to see them. They were emissary delegates asking for cooperation. If he ignored them intentionally, the other nobles hearing the news would stop expecting a fluke and gang up to fight against him. Though it was not a problem in the military aspect, he still worried that it might influence the citizens of the Eastern Region and Northern Region. Roland already viewed them as his treasure, and of course, he wanted to keep more population.

After a thought, he nodded slowly. "Bring them to the living room, and let Barov stay with them."

"Yes," Sean answered excitedly.

Looking at the guard's expression, Roland pondered what the guard might think was that in this way the whole kingdom would soon be ruled by him. Unfortunately, it was not as simple as it looked.

At the same time, he made a decision.

No matter what they said, he would stick to his principle and take back the feudal nobles' rights. This point must be conveyed to all the nobles clearly to show his determination for the implementation of new policies and the reform. If rebel nobles dared to lay their hands on the citizens, he would ensure they paid a heavy price for it.

...

There were only two people in the emissary delegation, now seated on one end of the long table when Roland walked into the living room. One of them was the Duke's second son, Cole Kant, and the other, a gorgeous woman. She appeared to be an assistant to Sir Cole, but in Roland's eyes, she was more outstanding than Sir Cole himself.

Of course, witches were the shiniest pearls when it came to appearance, so Roland did not pay much attention to this. After all, in this era, a female assistant might also play the role of a mistress or maid.

"Your Majesty, I bring my father's regards to you." Cole stood and bowed respectfully to Roland, and then he expressed his

intentions. "The Duke of the Northern Region has a gift for you."

# Chapter 556: The Bottom Line

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"A gift?" Roland said, raising his eyebrow. "What's that?"

"The Hawes Family and the Lista Family from the Northern Region... Your Majesty, both of the earls were not only disobeying your rules, but also attempting to collude with the other nobles to rebel. My father looked through their scheme and punished both of the families." Cole said regretfully, "However, I didn't expect you to come back to the Western Region so early. Due to my negligence, their heads working as our evidence were destroyed on the way."

"Hold on, your father directly executed both of the earls?"

"Uh," he looked at his assistant and said, "yes."

The Kant's effort to offer his service was stronger than what Roland had expected... "Taking the heads of the two earls as tokens of pledging allegiance shows that they could hardly gain further support from the nobles in the Eastern Region. In this case, the possibility of them joining up to resist his rule of their domain was greatly reduced." Roland thought to himself, "However, I'm not sure if he's lying at this moment without Nightingale being around."

Pondering for a moment, he whispered to Barov beside him, "Are the two families mentioned in the Northern Region?"

"Both Horsehead Hawes and Double Guns Lista were reputable

families of the Northern Region, even more influential than the five big families from the Western Region. Among them, Lista's ancestors armored up and went on an expedition for the Wimbledon Family. The double guns on the Kamon were taken from the Kingdom of Graycastle's flag." Barov unhurriedly said, touching his beard, "Of course, these happened more than 200 years ago. However, the name of the Kant Family was not very famous, I remember the family only appeared about 50 years ago... It was unexpected for Timothy to choose Calvin Kant to be the person-in-charge of the Northern Region. It may cause dissatisfaction with the older families. If the difference of their strengths were too much, it would be less effective, even though it's to pin down the two families."

"So what he said is true?" Roland automatically ignored the latter section the old director mumbled to show off his vast knowledge.

"Uh... it's unlikely a lie," Barov whispered. "However, this is a matter of the noble's glory. If it came through as a lie and you've accepted their allegiance, Northern Region will have botched it for themselves."

"That makes sense." Roland nodded slightly. "It doesn't really matter if it's a lie; the bottom line lies within ourselves. It could easily be discussed if the surrender of land ownership could be accepted. However, even the most expensive gifts are meaningless if it's about seizing power."

Thinking about it, Roland looked at Cole and smiled. "First of all, I'd like to express my gratitude to the Duke. Defending the honor of the royal family is the responsibility of every noble. Your father

has done a good job. Secondly, both of the earls have received the punishment they deserved, and the kingdom won't further look into what Duke Kant has done."

"Is, is that so? Father will be very happy to hear that." Cole seemed more than relieved. "He's always wanted to serve the true King and he finally has the chance now."

"Is it? I'm also very happy to accept the allegiance of Duke of the Northern Region... But he must agree to obey the new regulations of Graycastle."

"The new regulations?" Cole was slightly surprised. "What're they?"

"The regulation to retrieve the manor power of the noble." Roland was looking at Cole to measure his expression. He said word by word, "There'll no longer be any noble title in the kingdom. All the domains within the Kingdom of Graycastle will only have one lord, who is the King himself from now on."

"What?! Your Majesty, this..." Cole's expression drastically changed, he turned around and looked at his assistant again.

"Is he really the second son of the Duke? Although he looks a little younger, he shouldn't be worse than his female officer... His assistant at least managed to keep calm although she was shocked with her mouth slightly open. Of course, it was also possible that she couldn't understand what I said." Roland thought.

"No worries, nobles are still nobles. The munificent life you live won't change and you'll even have a chance to hit a new peak." Roland clapped his hands, summoning the attendant to prepare the "promotional manual". "Longsong Stronghold has fully implemented a new set of regulations. You can see many stories regarding the change and some real-life examples of the nobles in the manual. Although it may seem that the nobles have lost part of their privileges, in fact, it has also released the nobles from the manor to engage within the kingdom and even the dance floor of the entire continent."

Cole was totally lost. "But... I don't know..."

Cole's expression was slightly disappointing to Roland. "However, thinking about it, it's normal. As the second son of the Duke, he is after all just getting into his adulthood. He's probably just a messenger for this trip without the actual power of making any decision."

"Anyway, you can always send the message back to Duke Calvin. You can also stay in the City of Neverwinter and enjoy the unique scenery here while waiting for his answer—I think you'll love it here."

Although the Duke sending his second son on behalf indeed showed sincerity, Roland was not planning to waste it, so he was temporarily detaining the son to prevent the Duke from being reckless.

He thought that the meeting had come to an end, without expecting Cole to make another request.



"Your Majesty, may I have a tour within your domain to see how the paddle steamer and steam engine are made?"

It was a novel request. Roland looked at him with interest and said, "Are you interested in it?"

"Yes, I've heard about such a strange ship when I was in the king's city. I realized that they're everywhere here in the Western Region. I'm curious to learn how a paddle steamer moves without a sail." Cole said with one hand covering his chest.

"I see." Roland nodded with a smile and said, "I'll get Director Barov to arrange it."

...

Roland returned to the office after dealing with the northern envoy. He was just about to complete the drawing in his hand when he heard a rapid knock coming from outside the window. He turned around and saw two unexpected figures.

Lightning was lying on the windowsill while Maggie was crouching on her head, pecking on the glass window.

Roland's heart suddenly tightened. "It's only been three days. The paddle steamer shouldn't be able to return so soon. Could it be an accident?"

"Why did you come back first?" He opened the French window and impatiently asked, "What about the others?"

"Your Majesty! We've captured a demon!"

"However Anna, Leaf, and Nightingale were injured, coo!"

"Luckily, there's nothing serious!"

"However it's pretty painful, coo! Can you please allow Miss Nana to come with us?"

Listening to both of them scrambling to finish the story, Roland felt as if he was on a roller-coaster. He sighed and said, "Nothing serious?"

"No, coo!"

"I'll order people to fetch Nana." He turned around and walked out of the room. "Remember to finish telling everything at once next time!"

...

The next evening, two paddle steamers finally appeared at the west end of the Redwater River.

The First Army stayed behind and evacuated the No. 22 trestle, and prepared a covered carriage in order to prevent the crowd from becoming panicked at the sight of the demon. A temporary barrack was set up in the castle backyard, as a laboratory and a study of demons and Sigils, under Leaf's supervision.

Roland felt completely relieved when he saw Anna and Nightingale walking down the trestle. It was only four days since their departure, however, it felt like months to him. The time went by especially slow when he heard those two were injured.

"It's a difficult task this time." Roland grinned and opened up his arms to Anna.

Anna did not say anything but ran into Roland's arms and hugged him tightly.

Nightingale sighed. "You said you'd be waiting for us in the castle... The pier is not safe, Your Majesty."

"You too," Roland said and laughed. "You had a long day."

"Well..." she uncomfortably shifted her head and said, "It was actually alright."

Anna let go of Roland and pulled Nightingale in as well.

Followed by Wendy, then Leaf...

This time all the witches took turns to give Roland a hug, including Agatha and Iffy.

The figures of the crowd looked extremely long under the reflection of the maroon-colored setting sun.

# Chapter 557: Damage Testing

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After dinner, Roland immediately rushed to the castle's backyard even though he really wanted to have some private time with Anna first. However, the Red Mist from the demon was limited and the experiment had to be carried out immediately.

Almost all of the members of the Witch Union were present, even those who were not taking part in the test did not want to miss out on the chance to take a closer look at the enemy.

The dissected Mad Demon was already under Breeze's control, quietly lying in the middle of the shed's floor. This was the first time Roland got to see an alien being that was different from a human. It had a huge body and was even taller than Iron Axe by a full head's height. Its frozen arms were as thick as a human's thighs, with ridges of clearly defined muscles, fully-covered by blue blood vessels that showcased its great strength.

The black-blue color of its rough skin was supposed to be normal, considering that the demon's blood was blue in color. Roland reached out his hand to feel its body. Clearly, the demon's body was warmer and that meant that their metabolism rate was faster. In other words, the higher their metabolism rate was, the lower their environmental adaptability would be.

Since the Mad Demon had a respirator which was connected to its helmet, its appearance was temporarily hidden. However, judging from its entire appearance, it was obviously an advanced chordate. A Mad Demon at least had a human-like appearance, especially when compared to the ridiculous Fearsome Demon and

the Lord of Hell.

Of course, according to Agatha, the Junior Demon had lower intelligence and could not be compared to humans. When speaking of cunning and trickery, though, the Senior Demon was more like a human.

"Among the five demons, the Supermagic was melted by the Sigil of God's Will and one of the Mad Demons was dissected by Anna. Two bottles of Red Mist came from the remaining three and they were used on the way." Agatha rubbed her forehead, looking a little tired and her voice was much softer than usual. "The mist will only last until tomorrow evening. So, the experiment should be carried out before tomorrow afternoon, if we want to make the Sigil. I'll still need half a day to melt down the base of the Sigil and I may fail a few times during the process."

"The Red Mist is fatal to witches. How did you manage to change the gas tank?"

"We turned to the common people for help." She pointed at the sclerotin container that was set to the side and said. "I've brought back some of the empty storage tanks in case we needed them in the future."

Roland nodded and turned around to look at Breeze and said, "Can you control the magic power it used?"

"If it can do it," Breeze seriously answered, "I don't need to specifically manipulate its every move, but rather just give it an

order and force it to follow the order. This command is beyond the limits of language and thought, so even the demonic beasts would follow it. But of course, it shouldn't be too complicated."

"That's good." Roland then instructed Nana. "Connect the limbs so I can see the power and intervals of a Mad Demon spear thrower."

"Hold on. In the castle?" Lily frowned.

Mystery Moon, Hummingbird, and the others immediately hid behind Wendy. However, Paper and Summer, who had not experienced the destruction of the Witch Cooperation Association did not have much reaction. Their expressions showed curiosity instead of fear.

"Will there be an accident?" Softfeathers muttered.

"Don't worry. We're watching it," Iffy calmly said.

Roland had roughly understood the process of the Melting Point Action during the dinner. The unexpected appearance of a Senior Demon caused a panic among the team, leading them into danger. However, the witches finally managed to defeat the strong enemy. Iffy played an important role, especially after the Sigil of God's Will became ineffective. Her determination to make time for everyone to escape had changed the others' perspective towards her and her attitude towards non-combat witches also became softer. However, it was so subtle that even Iffy herself probably did not notice the slight transformations.

Perhaps it would take a little longer for her to be accepted as one of the team. However, Roland could see the opportunity for both sides to reconcile.

Nana reluctantly squatted down to start treating the demon.

There was absolutely no way to complete the "surgery" with conventional medicine. In a situation where there was a lack of an anti-freezing agent, it would only prevent the limbs from becoming rotten, but it would not be able to prevent the cellular structure from becoming burned by the freezing. However, the poor condition of the broken limbs was clearly improving and even the mottled burns were fading, bit by bit, under the unreasonable magic restoration.

Once the limbs were completely re-connected, the originally black-colored skin was gradually turning green which signified the blood was starting to re-circulate.

After half an hour, the demon quietly stood up from where it had been lying on the ground and slowly walked out of the shed.

The witches followed it out one by one and this was different from their former swarming manner of just rushing in. Now they formed a long line behind Wendy and Scroll. The mixed expressions of fear and curiosity on Mystery Moon's and the others' faces made Roland laugh uncontrollably.

Leaf had already prepared the "shooting range" which was a



target around 200 meters away from the wooden shed. There were a steel plate and a cuirass, which were hanging down from the grapevines located at the end of the garden fence after passing through the two rows of olive trees which lined both sides. It was also the conventional combat distance for a revolving rifle.

"Start." Roland signaled, looking at the demon with the bone spear.

"Yes."

Breeze just finished her words when the arms of the Mad Demon started to swell. The Magic Stone mounted on its arms was glowing with a faint yellow light. The demon stepped forward, with its body bent, and it threw the bone spear towards the target.

There was a flash of white, followed by the crisp noise of the cuirass, ringing in the distance.

His arms quickly shriveled, as if it had exhausted all its strength.

Probably due to its severe injuries, the recovery time was far longer than usual. Its arms only returned to their normal state after about an hour.

Of course, its throwing power was not weak.

The bone spear had completely penetrated the cuirass and it was firmly pinned to the fence. Pulling the bone spear out, it could be

seen that the spearhead was broken from the impact of throwing. There would be more damage if it were replaced by the iron short spear. However, looking at the dressing of the Mad Demon, the enemy probably had less of an understanding of metal utilization compared to humans. Even the armor of the Senior Demon did not look like it was made of pure metal.

After thinking about it, it was probably due to the high-temperature flame needed to smelt the metal, and the Red Mist happened not to be resistant. If the information given by Agatha was accurate, the demons must be very careful with their use of fire. If the human civilization had originated from fire, then the demons were probably born to hate their fire.

The next test was the quick throw.

The Mad Demon was forced to throw two bone spears within a short interval of time. However, it was roaring in pain. Although its body was controlled, the sharp pain caused by the overuse of Magic Stones was not removed. Its arms were paralyzed after it finished throwing. They looked shriveled and dry like bark and could not recover again.

Both of the bone spears had been crushed against the three millimeters thick steel plate.

Thus, the most threatening technique of the Mad Demon could be compared to revolving rifles using black powder bullets, which if replaced by the bolt rifle, could easily pierce through a steel plate.

# Chapter 558: Beauty

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After reaching the conclusion, Roland felt slightly relieved.

The basic combat capability of the demons did not exceed the combat efficiency of the conventional firearms as the machine gun and cannon were enough to crush all the enemies within the distance of 500 to 1,000 meters, while the spear thrower attack was obviously unsuitable for the trench warfare. Mad Demon would not even stand a chance as long as the bullet production kept up with the pace since it would take three to five seconds for the Magic Stone to charge up and take effect.

It implied that at least the humans would be competitive on the frontlines of the battlefield.

"It would be nice if you were born in Taquila." Agatha sighed while staring at the weapon in Roland's hand. "The number of common people on the Fertile Plains is 100 times more than those in the Kingdom of Graycastle, so is the number of witches. If every one of them had a spear in their hands, the demons would have probably run back to where they came from."

Roland smiled but he did not agree with it in his heart.

After all, it was a witch-dominated empire 400 years ago. He thought, [If there were really a weapon that gave the common people power beyond the witches, would the seniors of the Union have lightly accepted such an existence? Witches have always been the minority—there were millions of humans yet only thousands

of witches. This has been the case since the Land of Dawn until the Fertile Plains. Would the long-oppressed common people willingly set foot on the battlefield? Once the actual strength was reversed, the disintegration of the dominance hierarchy would inevitably lead to civil strife. The idea of fighting for the survival of the human beings was still extremely vague after the awakening of nationalism, not to mention a group of humans who had been living like slaves to have such a lofty ideal.]

Of course, Roland would not talk about these conclusions in the public and Agatha was simply a researcher of the Quest Society, so it would be better not to involve her in the political matters.

After the damage test, Anna amputated the demon again and put it into a steel cage.

"Is that all?" Agatha asked.

Roland shook his head and said, "That's all for today. The injury test shall begin tomorrow morning."

"What's that?"

"We're going to test the resistance ability of the various parts of the demon to shooting, as well as the effects of the chemicals, Pill of Madness and Dreamland Water," Roland answered. "Oh yeah, and get Lucia to separate the composition of Red Mist and see what we can get out of it."

[Unfortunately, the demon can't be kept alive for the long-term. Otherwise, more comprehensive data could be collected by using Nana's healing power on the demon.]

Agatha yawned and said, "Up to you. However, I'll need two witch assistants to help me make the Sigil and the materials must be prepared in advance as the blood doesn't last once the demon is dead. It's better to start melting the God's Stone of Retaliation when the demon is still alive." She paused and said, "By the way, what kind of Sigil do you want to make?"

"We can make any of them as long as we've sufficient Magic Stones?"

"Of course," she nodded and said, "the failure doesn't consume the stone itself but I... Oh no, nothing."

Roland raised his brows and asked, "What's with you?"

"Never mind. It was simply a slip of the tongue," Agatha curled her lips and said. "At most you'll only be losing some raw materials."

Roland did not continue pressing since Agatha did not want to go on. "Let me come back to you with an answer tomorrow morning after I study the 'Magic Stone Collection'".

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It was bound to be a sleepless night.

Edith Kant was standing by the window, overlooking the city under the night sky. [Businessmen always refer to candlelight as wealth; the brighter a place is in the night, the wealthier it is.] She thought that within the Inner City of the king's city, the scene of a brightly lit night would only exist near the taverns and theatres.

However, she could never really grasp the true meaning of brightly lit night here, within the Southern Coast of the Redwater River.

Looking from afar, the shore was as bright as if it were lit. However, it was not the orange-glow of the bonfire but a soft-yellow light, looking bright yet stable as if it were a yarn-covered sunlight.

The entire factory area would be continuously producing a variety of goods at night, goods that they called industrial products.

The steam engine was one of them.

The afternoon visit had left Edith feeling an indescribable shock. A shock which was beyond the shock left by the fight on the battlefield or anything else... It was even beyond comparison with the removal of land command mentioned by His Majesty.

When she entered the factory, she saw some rough iron ingots

that were being spun and drilled one by one, her attention was instantly caught, especially when the dirty iron slabs that were full of grease and scrapes transformed into shiny components that had been given a sense of newborn beauty.

The hard materials were processed into different shapes by the roaring machines that could work by themselves after being put together in a unique way—what a wonderful sight it was.

The factory was not a wonderful place with the running sewage and metal scraps all over the floor, in addition to the noise and humid air, but Edith had stayed there for an entire afternoon.

And, she could clearly remember the City Hall officer who brought the emissary delegation to visit was looking impatient and wanted to leave the noisy place early. The officer felt relieved when the group of people finally intended to leave and there was a statement she could freshly remember, "What's so interesting about this machine? Only His Majesty Roland will think that there's a hidden beauty within these black blotches."

[Hidden beauty?]

Edith suddenly felt a strong resonance.

That was right... It was the beauty that was brought by the pure power and that could knead and transform the metal without any restraint. There was an additional kind of beauty with the aid of a natural trend, especially after she understood the operational principle of the steam engine.

The beauty was far beyond the beauty of colorful gems and exquisite luxury clothing.

She could only feel that something had faintly touched her heart.

[How does His Majesty know these pieces of knowledge? What else does he know?]

Suddenly, a knocking sound outside the bedroom interrupted Edith's thoughts.

"Sister, I've done bathing," Cole stuck his head in and said, "and the water is still warm. Do you want to take a bath as well?"

"Get the servant to boil a new basin of water." She ordered. "Do you understand the principle of the water intake here?"

"I've sent someone to ask around. The water of the pipeline seems to flow out from the standing iron tower." Cole touched his head while walking into the room. "As for how the water flows upwards from the well, they didn't really say anything about it. Oh yeah, there was something in the bathroom that you must try. It looks like a special fat but it smells really good after soaking in the water. It feels fantastic to clean the body with it. I can assure you that even the milk and rose bath is not as comfortable!"

[Is this deliberately arranged by His Majesty?] Edith could not help but ponder. The residence of the emissary delegation was



located near the castle district. It was a four-story building with a top floor that was higher than half of the castle; not only could they enjoy the night view of the City of Neverwinter from there, but even the layout and facilities of the rooms were quite ingenious—although it was not big, it was comfortable to live in. A reception officer from the City Hall mentioned that it was the hotel His Majesty specifically prepared for the foreign emissary, which was calling the Foreign Affairs Building.

From what she could see, it was Roland Wimbledon's intention to show off with both the clear water that was pouring out from the valve once it was unscrewed and the washing material that Cole was praising about.

# Chapter 559: A Discussion about the System

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"What do you think of it?" Edith sat back to the bed.

"The bathroom?"

"No, the new laws."

"Um..." Cole was a bit hesitated. "I'm going to write father a letter tomorrow and tell him His Majesty's terms. I don't think he'll agree."

"Really?" Edith neither approved nor disapproved.

Seeing Edith did not refute him, Cole ventured more confidently. "I've read the booklet distributed by His Majesty. Let's put aside the credibility issue for now and just look at the example. The top-ranking noble listed as the example is just an earl's son, who is currently equivalent to a duke without lands. To be honest, I'd definitely make the same choice if I were merely a knight. However, our father is the designated ruler of the Northern Region, Duke of the City of Evernight. He has far greater power and more distinctive social status than the oldest son of the Honeysuckle Family. If he agrees to His Majesty's terms, it means he's consenting to hand over his domain. This isn't a promotion, but a demotion instead."

"Good reasoning." Edith nodded with a smile, but soon went on before her brother could feel good about himself. "But you've missed one thing."

"What?"

"Whether we're able to keep our current status and power is uncertain."

Cole was a little stunned.

"You've apparently focused on the story in the latter part of the booklet, but I care more about the paragraph at the beginning." Edith picked up the advertising pamphlet from the nightstand and flipped over the cover page. "If this is really His Majesty's idea... I have to say it's quite interesting."

"The cause... of feudalism?" Cole peeped over her shoulder. "Have you figured out what it means?"

"It's just a made-up word. You can call it the current system or the system of nobility."

Cole looked confused.

Edith shook her head in silence. It seemed quite strange to put such an awkward paragraph at the very beginning of the booklet. The writing did not really flow at first glance, and the contents were also much drier than the following examples. Nevertheless, after probing into its underlying meanings, she realized that this opening statement was the basis of Roland Wimbledon's decision to implement the new laws.

It was her first time to come across such an innovative and eloquent argument.

"Have you ever thought of the reason we grant lands to subordinate knights and vassals?"

"To have them remain loyal to the Kant Family," Cole mumbled, "and also to attract more courageous men to work for us."

"What if our father becomes the sole ruler of the entire Northern Region?" Edith continued to ask.

"Do you mean to have all the lands go to our family?" Cole shook his head after some contemplation. "That won't work. If we hold all the lands, these knights will lose their properties and thus leave for somewhere else to seek employment, so will the lower nobles. The Kant Family will then become the only nobles in the town."

"Isn't it nice?"

"Of course not!" Cole winked, failing to understand why his sister asked such a self-evident question. "The Northern Region is way too large to handle by ourselves. It takes the guards around half a week just to march from the City of Evernight to the Palisade City in the event of an attack, not to mention the extra time we need to deliver messages. Plus, it'll be rather problematic to collect taxes and food. We can't wait for those lowlifes to voluntarily make the payment, can we?"

"So, we constantly increase our subordinates to keep our lands is fundamentally due to the potential war requirements and our limitations of management. These two factors are also what His Majesty thinks the main cause of feudalism." Edith said while caressing the booklet, "However, things have changed. No matter how we arm ourselves, it's futile to resist His Majesty's unstoppable army. Meanwhile, His Majesty firmly believes a powerful City Hall will be able to manage the whole region. As a matter of course, there'll be no need to grant lands to the nobles."

"Well..." Cole groped unsuccessfully for adequate words, failing because he did not know what to respond.

"Roland Wimbledon thinks such a change is inevitable." Edith pointed to the last sentence of the opening statement. "A well-functioning centralized government will unavoidably replace feudal nobles, because a unified management system will make better use of resources across the whole region and maximize people's potential, and thereby largely increase the productivity of the entire kingdom. Productivity determines the dominant power of the state."

"Nonsense." Cole bellowed. "What's productivity? Farming skills? A knight can knock 10 farmers down. Besides, where does he get so much manpower to... administer the whole country and take charge of tax collection? He still, after all, needs to rely on the nobles. In that case, what will be the difference? Those lowlifes won't care about who their King is."

"I'm as curious as you are in this regard." Edith curled up her lips

into a smile. "But don't you think the person who is capable of jotting down such a plan will have full preparation for the implementation of the new laws?" She paused for a moment and then said, "Let's call on him again tomorrow. I'll do the talking this time."

"That fast?" Cole was surprised. "Don't you usually reveal your true identity only after they inquire about it?"

"I can't wait till then." Edith shrugged. "Also, don't write to father just yet. You've heard that he's let me take the lead on this meeting."

"Are you... going to agree to His Majesty's proposal?" Cole gasped. "Father will kill you!"

"Huh?"

"Um... No, I mean he'll resent you." Cole soon corrected himself. "After all, he sent you primarily for the purpose of keeping his title as a duke."

"Don't worry. I'm not that amenable." Edith raised her eyebrows. "Since the king has already placed his bid, surely I have to negotiate a better price, don't you think?"

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The following day, Roland received multiple injury test reports

in succession.

Demons were by no means physically stronger than witches. Although both guns and swords could fatally injure them, toxin could not due to their different physiological structure.

For instance, none of the chlorine, nitric oxide and carbon monoxide had any impacts on demons. Even they did, it resulted from the decrease in the effective ingredients in the Red Mist.

Neither the Dreamland Water nor the Pill of Madness worked. The Dreamland Water had failed to make the demon fall asleep, and the Pill of Madness did not drive him crazy.

As to the ingredients of the Red Mist, it was composed of various gases and water. Kyle Sichi had confirmed through experiments that one part of the ingredients was flammable with an unpleasant odor. Another part was nitrogen, and the rest was unknown. However, demons appeared to depend on the feeble magic power swarming in the Mist rather than these ingredients to maintain their lives, which was also why the Red Mist could only be preserved for a short period of time.

Furthermore, the Red Mist would break down faster at a temperature of 300 °C and would even burn at 800 °C.

Roland folded the reports and put them in the drawer. It seemed that other than regular firearms, the fire also lethal to demons. At least, its high temperature could effectually break down the Red Mist. Given that, it seemed that they could instantly reverse the

situation by setting a great fire on demons' campgrounds.



# Chapter 560: Uncovering the Truth

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Roland was debating which kind of incendiary weapon was easier to manufacture when a guard came in. "Your Majesty, the ambassadors of the Northern Region requested to see you."

[It has been just one day...] Roland thought, feeling a bit surprised. [Are they planning to directly turn down my offer without even letting the duke know?]

"Bring them to the drawing room." He instructed after a momentary silence. "Also, ask Carter to block all the exits to the Foreign Affairs Building and stop the emissary delegation from getting out."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Since they had refused to agree to his policies, it left him no choice but to detain them by force.

...

When Roland entered the drawing room, he noticed that the pair across the long table had switched their seatings. The lady, who claimed to be the assistant to Cole, was sitting in the guest of honor seat, whereas Cole was sitting next to her with a book in his hand.

"Your Majesty, I'm the first daughter of the Duke of the City of Evernight, Edith Kant, Cole's sister. Please accept the best regards

from the Kant Family." The lady rose and performed a perfect curtsy. "Please forgive Cole for not introducing me during our first meeting."

"Calvin's daughter?" Roland was intrigued by this turn of the events and after a short pause said, "So you're the real leader of the emissary delegation?"

"Yes." She placed her hand on her chest. "My father has authorized me to act on his behalf with respect to all matters concerning this visit and has also given me his seal."

It was fairly rare for a woman to participate in political affairs in this era, especially for a young and pretty one. Judging from Edith's confident expression, Roland could tell it was evidently not her first time to deal with heads of state. Every trait of her demeanor was impeccable. As to holding back her real identity, Roland knew it was simply a little trick to draw his attention. It was not a deliberate act of concealment or deception whatsoever, but just a disguise to mislead the other party. Most nobles would view it as a bold and playful move, which he had to admit was really effective.

"In other words, you can make the decision on behalf of your father?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. More accurately, he'll follow my advice."

[That's such a confident answer,] thought Roland, who was amused to see Cole scratching his head beside his sister.

"Alright... So, Miss Edith, what's your purpose of this meeting?"

Roland had thought she would politely decline his terms or talk him out of implementing the new laws using a more "playful" tactic, but he did not expect to see her taking out a booklet from her backpack and spreading it on the table. That was the exact booklet he had drafted.

"I have a few questions to ask you." Edith came straight to the point. "You said feudal nobles will be obsolete as the centralized power increases. However, how are you going to guarantee the effective management of all the local authorities in the Kingdom without the assistance of nobles?"

[Is she... planning to discuss politics with me?] Roland thought.

From her sincere look, Roland knew she was serious.

It had been a long time since he had heard such an interesting question.

"By people and the development of technologies," Roland answered after pondering for a long time.

"Do you mean free men? What's the development of technologies?"

"Correct. A management team trained, paid and disbursed by the City Hall. Since the City Hall will provide labors and necessary equipment, administrators aren't required to have large properties or affluent manpower. Therefore, it doesn't matter whether they're nobles or not." Roland started to explain what a centralized government should look like and how ordinary people could get promoted, as well as the practical significance of technologies in domain control. It took him an hour to detail everything.

"How are you going to avoid dereliction of duty among the administrators of the king's city?"

How will the trade be distributed after the unification of the Kingdom of Graycastle?

And can you really evaluate the performance of your policies with productivity?"

"..."

Edith's eyes glistened with excitement as she raised more questions. It had been about noon by the time they finally closed their conversation. She heaved a sigh of relief. "I see. You did have a thorough consideration before writing down the opening statement."

Roland sipped the tea in satisfaction. As a person who did not major in political science, this was all he could talk about regarding politics.

"Thank you very much for your time, Your Majesty. I didn't expect you would answer my questions in such detail."

"The very basic requirement for a City Hall in the new era is to publicize the policies and enable everybody to have a comprehensive understanding of its contents. Only in this way will things go well when it comes to the implementation."

Edith gave an approving nod and then switched the topic. "Could you provide the Northern Region with the equipment and workers for manufacturing steam engines?"

"I'm afraid I can't provide the workers as the City of Neverwinter is also short of manpower. But you're welcome to send your men to study here, provided that the nobles in the Northern Region waive their feudal rights and agree to be under the supervision of the City Hall."

"You'll also teach them how to manufacture paddle steamers?"

"Of course. As long as they're willing to pay gold royals, this won't be a problem. However, it'll be hard to move the production line to the north in a short period of time without the assistance of witches."

"I'm very surprised by your honesty, Your Majesty." She meditated for a while. "But there's one thing I don't quite understand. According to your plan, you can easily unify the whole Kingdom of Graycastle in ten years. By then, the new policies won't face any backlash from the public and you won't really need

to care about our opinions. Why are you so anxious to implement these new laws?"

Roland was silent. It took him quite a while to reply. "Do you really want to know the reason?"

Edith did not expect he would speak in such a grave tone, so her manner tightened into formality as well. "Yes."

"Then follow me." Roland rose. "I'll show you one thing."

...

Roland led Edith to the backyard in shadows of trees and took her to the wooden shed at the center of the olive woods.

A demon, whose limbs had been amputated, was lying on a long table. There were all sorts of vials and flasks piling around him. Agatha was taking his blood samples to complete the final step of the preparation.

"My goodness, what's... this?" Edith had cried out in a low voice in disbelief, but Roland noticed she was simply shocked but not afraid.

"I should have locked the shed and asked Leaf to surround the whole yard." Agatha frowned. "Don't tell me that you plan to let a common people participate in the sigil manufacture. If I were integrating the God's Stone, I would have probably failed already."

"Of course not... We won't be here long." Roland coughed to conceal his embarrassment and then turned to Edith. "The creature you see is of a different race. It's what you rumored as a demon. They live to the north of the Impassable Mountain Range and are also the biggest enemies that human beings are to face. The war between the demons and mankind has nothing to do with domains or wealth, but with life and death."

"Demon? A war of life and death?" Edith muttered involuntarily.

"Right. It's a long story that the church has been keeping as a secret. It can be dated back to 1,000 years ago when people called it—the 'Battle of Divine Will'."

# Chapter 561: The Magic Power of Blood

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Agatha was relieved when Roland and the woman finally left.

[Was I being too much just now? Perhaps I should be more kind towards the lord even in the face of a common people. After all, 400 years have passed, the world is different now.] Despite these thoughts, she still did not like non-witches entering the laboratory where the Sigil was produced and she did not want His Majesty to know the method of making the Sigil.

Of course, the latter would soon be revealed.

Agatha turned around to set up the six square wooden boxes she had prepared in the morning and inserted the God's Stones of Retaliation His Majesty collected into them.

It was the template for making the Sigil base.

Four Sigils of Listening, a Sigil of Screaming and a Sigil of Observing were what she needed to make.

As she had expected, His Majesty did not choose any combat Sigils, but instead, he chose the basic supplementary Sigils in accordance with the Magic Stones in hand. The action of using high-quality Magic Stones left by a Supermagic to make the Sigil of Screaming and the Sigil of Observing was considered a waste in the



Quest Society.

Now that Roland possessed powerful firearms, the demand for the combat Sigils was of course, not as strong.

Not to mention that the stronger the Sigil was, the more magic power would be required.

A knocking sound came from outside the shed again.

It seemed that in addition to an independent research tower, she would also need a few servants. Agatha reluctantly put down the Magic Stone in her hands and opened the wooden door.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty? Anything else..."

"Thank you for waiting, Miss Agatha."

"Mmm hmm, do you need me to treat the demon again?"

It was Anna and Nana entering this time. They were the assistants Agatha had requested from Roland.

"No. Ahem," she corrected herself and said, "You're just in time. I've just finished screening. Let's put the materials into the boxes, and then we can officially start the production."

...

When the bright blue blood flew into the wooden box through the coated flexible tube, some incredible changes began to happen to the God's Stones.

When the blood dripped onto the stones, a series of bubbles emerged. Like a burning candle, the corner areas of the hard stones were melted into sticky liquid flowing down from the stones, revealing the God's Stones themselves.

The demon was desperately struggling, exhausting the very last effort it had left as if it was aware of what they were doing. Unfortunately for it, the struggle was futile under the confinement of the solid iron chain.

Soon, the six boxes were filled with the blood of the Mad Demon. The first box looked as if it were boiling. The surging liquid was mixed with fine sand, mercury, and the God's Stone, looking sticky and muddy.

Anna carefully observed the changes and asked, "Does the raw materials affect the quality of Sigil?"

"Yes, it mainly depends on the God's Stone of Retaliation and the magic power of blood. The Quest Society thought that the magic power transformed all aspects of the body. The physical quality of Senior Witches was apparently better than that of ordinary witches. Moreover, the transcendents had achieved their limitation at this point. In order to improve the efficiency of the

Sigil, we would try our best to choose the blood of the strongest demon and the God's Stones of the best quality to make better Sigils. For example, Lady Alice's God's Sigil of Retaliation was completed with the blood of a dying Supermagic on the battlefield.

"Will the same happen when a witch's blood merges with the God's Stone?"

"Not the same. The God's Stone won't melt like a candle and the reaction won't be as intense. The liquid formed can flow freely like water now. However, the demon's blood will eventually solidify and become as hard as stone." Agatha said while inserting a piece of separating panel into the wooden box, "Therefore, the process of making Sigil is similar to melting metal. Before it's completely solidified, we have to embed the Magic Stones and complete the most crucial step—connecting the Magic Vein.

"Vein?" Anna was curious. "Like a plant?"

Agatha nodded. "Remember what I said previously? The Quest Society thought that only life could carry magic power, and without the Magic Vein, a Sigil will only be a dead object. The Magic Stones would still be individual entities but would not jointly produce the incredible power after the combination."

"Does this mean that the demon's blood can give these ordinary substances... life?" she asked in surprise.

"It doesn't happen with the demon's alone." Agatha calmly answered, "We need a witch's blood as well."

Nana was shocked. She covered her mouth with her hands.

"The Quest Society only discovered this secret by accident. Mixing the witch's blood with the demon's would produce a strange effect, keeping the melted God's Stone 'alive', like a plant. The vein would not lose the effect of magic power even if it was left aside for a long time... I'm not sure how to describe it. Anyway, you'll understand when you see it. "

The first box of liquid had cooled down, revealing a layer of grayish light. It looked like condensed blue wax oil.

Agatha removed the panel, leaving two hemispherical grooves and a strip of shallow groove in the box. Then she picked up the knife on the table and slid it across her wrist—the bright crimson blood gushed out thickly, filling up half of a wine glass. She said to the little girl, "Help me heal the wound, please."

This was the reason Agatha had chosen both of them.

Anna had the best learning ability within the union. She was suitable for the inheritance of the skill and Nana could help to effectively reduce Agatha's pain. Healing witches were the main forces of the front-line combat in Taquila, it was impossible to arrange for any of them to support the Quest Society. Most of the time, the laboratory could only use herbs to treat the wounds after releasing blood.

If it were not for the hope of defeating the demons Roland

Wimbledon showed her and the unbiased treatment to all the witches, she would rather bury the method of the Sigil making for good. The fact that the witch's blood could be perfectly blended into the demon's blood was unacceptable to most people even in the union. Even with her personal exposure to this matter, she had once suspected the origins of witches. Such confusion was very detrimental to the Battle of Divine Will, thus, the making of Sigil was one of the secrets that the members of the union had strictly kept.

She did not want His Majesty to participate in the observation for this reason.

Especially there were the rumors about witches being minions that had fallen into the demon's seduction.

Agatha hoped to delay the time when Roland would find out even though he would find out sooner or later.

[It's probably a self-delusion.] She secretly sighed to herself.

When the mixture was semi-hard, Agatha embedded the Magic Stone into the groove and poured her warm blood onto it. The crimson blood was flowing within the shallow groove and the cobalt-toned blood clots surrounding it started to wriggle; the edge of both gradually blurred, forming into an interpenetrated form.

After that, she injected magic power into the Sigil.

Suddenly, the red-colored blood line projected fine rays of light and numerous light-spots were flowing within the vein. It was rhythmically expanding and shrinking with wriggling movements, as if it were breathing.

Anna and Nana understood the meaning of Agatha's words at the same time.

The Sigil had come "alive"

# Chapter 562: The Witnesses

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"So... was it successful?" Anna softly asked.

"Yes. Then, it should be cut and sealed within the silver foil." Agatha nodded and said, "The final step is different depending on the type of Sigil. For example, the Sigil of Screaming should not be cut as it would be used a whole."

"What will happen if we fail?"

"The bloodlines won't be able to collect the magic power for some unknown reason. There's always a chance of this happening no matter how good the materials are. The solution is pretty simple as well, we just need to pry the magic stone off and redo it."

"But, it'd consume the blood..." Anna frowned.

"That's why the demon's blood was considered more precious than the witch's blood in Taquila." Agatha self-deprecatingly smiled. "No one cared if the witch's blood was wasted during an experiment. But we would be scolded and punished if we wasted demons' blood."

...

There were two sigils that failed out of the six in the end. Although the steps were completely the same as before, two of the bloodlines did not respond to the magic power injection. In other

words, they did not come alive.

Agatha pried off the Magic Stones and took the reserved wooden box out to continue the second production.

She had to hurry up since the demon was almost dead.

The alien that was fixed to the wooden table started having irregular spasms and the black-blue colored skin started to gradually turn gray. The excessive blood loss had caused its breathing to become intensively and the Red Mist below its helmet had obviously faded. Once the Mist had been exhausted, the demon would die shortly after and the blood would only last for about 15 minutes past death.

"Wait a minute." Anna stopped her when Agatha raised the knife. "Use my blood."

Anna had already cut the skin on her wrist open with her Blackfire when Agatha was about to object. "Nana can heal the wound but she cannot replenish the blood. His Majesty has mentioned that losing too much blood could cause dizziness and you may even pass out. It'd not be beneficial to you or your experiment. Of course, it'd be best for you to rest for a few days before resuming your practices and productions. You'll recover faster if you eat more meat porridge and liver during your recuperation."

"... Is that what His Majesty said?"



"Yes, every witch had to attend the injury self-help class," Anna said with a smile, "and, the main reason you selected me as your assistant was for me to learn the method of Sigil making, wasn't it? It's better for me to operate these two."

Agatha kept quiet for a moment and said, "In that case, thank you."

"You're welcome," she gently said, "I'm very interested in it as well."

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"... The witch empire was split apart and completely disintegrated after the demon's attack. The people who survived traveled across the mountains and crossed the river to the Wild Places to rebuild the city. This is the third time—as well as the very last approach for us to prepare for the Battle of the Divine Will. It has become the truth of history."

With these words, Roland quietly observed Edith's expression with his chin propped on his hand.

The afternoon sun streamed into the room, shedding a touch of glory in front of the desk. The lady in deep contemplation looked just like a statue, and her green-colored hair reflected a pale-white color in the sunlight. Her beautiful face did not even show the slightest change at hearing the frightening news, but instead, Edith's eyes showed more of an excitement and curiosity as Roland had expected.

She kept quiet for a while and slowly said, "You wouldn't try to fool me by fabricating such an... incredible story. Are the demons really that powerful?"

"There's no doubt. Each of them is an aggressive individual and there're an astonishing number of them. My army could easily defeat Timothy's knightage but they cannot necessarily defeat the demons. After all, they've been lurking around the north-west region of the Land of Dawn, unlike the witches who will need to start from scratch. The most important danger is that there'll be no negotiating for this battle, and it won't end until one of the two parties is destroyed."

"In that case... are you planning to break the news to everyone?"

"Sooner or later." Roland sighed. "But not now, I'm not sure how the people will respond regarding the horrible and ruthless alien enemy and building confidence is a slow process."

"I agree with you. Panic is indeed scarier than any enemy," Edith nodded and said, "I've one last question. How far away from us is the Battle of Divine Will?"

"Five years or sooner... Nobody knows the exact time the Bloody Moon will arrive. I can only say that the war may break out at any time, and thus, I'm not able to slowly unify the Kingdom of Graycastle little by little."

She did not answer but stood up from her seat and kneeled down

onto one knee and said," In this case, the Kant Family is willing to be at your service. Your law will not be unimpeded in the North and your order will be the only voice there." She stopped for a moment and then said, "I also hope that all of your promises are honored."

"Are you still thinking about the steam engine plant?" Roland shook his head and smiled. "Your father may not necessarily agree with that and what can the Kant Family guarantee with..."

"Me," she said without hesitation.

"What?"

"Your Majesty, I'm the guarantee. If you're still worried about it, Cole can stay here as well." Edith spoke with confidence, "In this case, my father would have to agree even if he is unwilling to."

"You're saying you'll stay in the City of Neverwinter as a hostage?" Although Roland meant to do just that, speaking it out loud still made him feel slightly embarrassed. "Isn't that a threat in disguise in the eyes of the Duke?"

"Not as a hostage." she saluted in a knight's manner with a hand covering her chest. "Please allow me to join your City Hall; I'd like to witness the new world you have planned."

...

Roland received six of the newly-made Sigils that night.

"Thank you for all of your hard work." He looked at Agatha and nodded. "Did the process go well?"

"We failed twice with the first batch and Anna also participated with part of the making process," Agatha yawned and said, "Anyway, if you want me to make more Sigils, please give me a spacious independent laboratory instead of a simple shabby stable-like shed."

"I owe you a Spellcaster's Tower," Roland happily responded.

Nightingale stuck her head out from behind Roland's back after the ice witch left the office and said, "What's the use of these Sigils?"

"They're probably the equivalent of a phone, alarm, and camera?"

"What're they for?"

"You'll know after you try it," Roland said with a smile.

It was a pretty productive day today. The Sigils of Listening would temporarily solve the challenges of transmitting long-distance messages. Although they were scarce and could only be used by witches, they were still better than entirely depending on a carrier pigeon. The Sigil of Screaming tweeted at a high pitch

when it sensed demon power and it also effectively suppressed any of the enemies' sneak attacks and the area of coverage was about the size of the Border Area. The Sigil of Observing could assist with Thunder's adventure plan. It would be a pity for Roland to miss the spectacular and strange sealine since he was unable to follow the fleet out to sea.

Of course, what pleased Roland the most was Edith Kant's pledge of allegiance.

Nothing was sweeter than the extra population and the added resources. If the North was really offering their comprehensive service to him, Roland's actual control of the territory would be doubled and the excessive power of the nobles at the Eastern Region would feel the pressure.

If everything went well, he might be able to accomplish the great reunification before the arrival of the Months of Demons this year.

# Chapter 563: Joan

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The Swirling Sea, the Fjords Islands.

A mist began to rise over the sea, making them feel like they were sailing through the clouds. Shortly after they left Snowwave Island, it was out of sight, except for a vast expanse of whiteness. It looked as if the island had never existed. Only the splash of the water hitting on the bottom part of the ship let Margaret, who now found it hard to tell their location in the mist, know they were still moving forward.

Sailors considered sailing in misty weather a taboo.

Usually, if a captain asked them to do so, they would tie him up and throw him into the sea.

They would always, however, follow Thunder's orders since he was not only the captain of the Chase but also the most famous explorer of the Fjords.

No matter where Thunder wanted to go, be it a bottomless pit or a stream of lava deep inside a volcano, he would always be able to recruit some people willing to follow him.

"Captain, the Dark Reef Area is just in front of us!" shouted a sailor, who was familiar with the underwater terrain here.

"Lower the sails and slow down," said Thunder while clapping his

hands. "Attention, everybody. That's our destination! Prick your ears up and keep your eyes open to watch the water around us."

"Yes!" they chorused.

Since Thunder secretly met His Majesty in the king's city of Graycastle and got Roland's support, he had not wasted a single day to prepare for his third travel to the Shadow Islands. In order to explore the secret Sealine and tides, he needed a suitable ship, outstanding explorers, and more importantly, a witch who could observe the tides below the sea.

The witch he wanted was Joan, a childhood friend of Margaret.

"Are we really going to find her here?" Molly stood on the Magic Servant's head and looked around and added, "I see nothing at all."

"Joan only appears when we're in trouble. She won't just turn a blind eye to a ship that's going into a dangerous area," Margaret said in a low voice.

"She had transformed into a fish now?"

"The last time I saw her, only her legs had changed into a fishtail, but it was over 10 years ago. I'm not sure how she looks like now," Margaret answered while shaking her head.

"It's a type of summoning magic ability. She can transform into any animal in the sea. If she's lived in the sea for all those years as

you said, she must have passed the Day of Awakening smoothly. But as so many years have passed, is it true that she's still in this sea?" Camilla Dary, Chief Chamberlain of the Sleeping Island said after a thought.

"My lady, please trust us. Since I knew she was a witch, I've kept a close eye on this sea. Her singing voice is the symbol of Snowwave Island and I've heard that some merchants attracted by it even desired to capture and keep her," Thunder said with a smile.

"Did you stop them?" Camilla asked, raising her eyebrow.

"A shipwreck stopped them, and no one dares to do that again. I promise," Thunder answered and winked at her.

"I see... Thank you for helping the witches," she said with her hand on her chest.

"Thanks, Uncle!" added Molly.

"Hah-hah, I look that old to you?" Thunder touched his beard, and said, "It's not very long."

Seeing this, Margaret who stayed by his side, shook her head at the fact that he was still popular among girls. She knew on any island of Fjords, he was the most popular man and that was why he won her affection.



She thought it was a pity since he had his daughter Lightning, he had given up the idea of starting another marriage.

"Boss, I seem to hear a singing voice! In the northwest!" shouted someone suddenly, in the stern of the ship.

"Be quiet, everybody!" Thunder and the witches simultaneously run to the stern of the sailing ship, followed by Margaret.

Everyone held their breath and listened attentively. The tenuous, vacant singing voice gradually became clearer. It came from a certain direction instead of reverberating all around, acting like a beam of light coming through the thick mist to guide the Chase to a safe route.

"Reef the sails and drop the anchor! Put the landing shuttle down in the sea." Thunder ordered.

Ever since Joan awakened and became a witch, she always remained hidden to avoid being caught by anybody. As she guided the ships in distress with only her voice, very few people had seen her before. Given that, Thunder planned to let the Chase lay at anchor to attract Joan. Meanwhile, he took the witches and Margaret on a small boat to trace her by following her voice.

The Magic Servant dove into the water to carry the landing shuttle forward, saving the trouble of paddling.

They traveled in the thick mist for less than 10 minutes, and then

Margaret suddenly saw a green figure in the sea.

"Joan!" she could not help but shout loudly.

The singing voice promptly stopped,

They saw a girl floating in the water while revealing only her upper body above the surface. She stared at the people in the boat and seemed at a loss. Her eyes widened in surprise, and her skin was pale white as if she hardly exposed herself to the sunlight. Her hair was like fluffy seaweed, hanging down to cover half of her face, but they could still see some markings like scales on her cheek and neck.

"It's me, Margaret! Do you remember me?"

"Yih-yih-yeh." The girl made some intermittent sounds.

"It's no use. She hasn't talked to people for too long. She can't speak now." Thunder interrupted decisively. "Now, let's leave this communication problem to you, Lady Camilla."

Camilla nodded and then put her hand on Margaret's shoulder.

Instantly, Margaret heard what Joan said in her head.

[Are you... bringing them here to catch me?]

[No, I come here to...]

"Say it in your heart. She can hear you that way and it's more sincere to communicate with your heart." Camilla interrupted.

Margaret swallowed to calm down, thinking about what she should say.

[You once saved my life. Joan, do you remember? I come here to ask for your help.]

After a long while, Margaret heard Joan once again.

[I remember you, Margaret. We often played together in the past.]

Amazed by what was happening, Margaret was lost in thought. [This is the ability of the witch. It's incredible... Luckily, Thunder predicted the language problem before we set off and invited Camilla Dary from the Sleeping Spell to join this travel. She can enable people to communicate with their hearts.]

[Who is Camilla Dary?]

[Oops, I forget all my thoughts can be heard by her now,] Margaret thought and quickly concentrated again. She "explained" in her heart. [Camilla Dary is the lady who is helping us to communicate with our hearts. She's a witch just like you.]

[The sailors don't catch witches?]

[Of course, the church has been completely destroyed. Now witches have settled down on the Fjords and the Sleeping Island is a town built by witches. If you want to go there, I'll show you the way.]

[Oh?] Joan sounded excited and asked further, [What has happened recently? Someone intended to spear me with a harpoon. I thought they must come here for the church's reward.]

[Nothing like that will happen again. Lord Thunder has solved the problem.]

[Thunder? You mean the most distinguished explorer!]

[Yes, he's right behind me. You don't know, but I joined his exploration platoon shortly after I left the fishing village.]

[Really? Tell me more about it.]

...

After a long time, Joan said, "Yeah!" and she dove back into the sea, leaving only ripples on the water surface.

"How's it going?" Thunder asked.

Margaret turned around and smiled, saying, "She's accepted our request."

# Chapter 564: The Ambassador of the Kingdom of Graycastle

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Noise suddenly filled the coach, as it had arrived in the City of Glow.

Yorko could not help but open the curtain to have a look. There were all kinds of shop fronts along both sides of the road. Some of the shop owners had erected tents in the front and offered some tables and chairs for the people to have a rest there. Some had their goods laid out on the ground, stood beside them and cried out to attract business. The long street looked just like a market.

For a moment, he felt as if he had come to the Eagle City which developed from a market,

But he soon thought of the fact that Queen of Clearwater had already burned the Eagle City to the ground. And the shape of the lofty buildings in a distant place also suggested that this city was large and different.

"What do you think of the king's city of the Kingdom of Dawn?" A woman behind him asked drowsily.

"It's indeed the city of merchants. Even peddler is allowed on the main street. If it's in the Kingdom of Graycastle, the patrol team will milk them dry. I'm afraid only the Fjords can compete with your city." Yorko exclaimed in admiration.

"The Fjords?" The women snorted. "They're just porters who transport goods to remote places and sell them, taking advantage of price variations in different markets. The islands have nothing to sell except for cheap salted fish."

"Of course, you're the most brilliant merchant," Yorko said and turned around, smiling.

"You're not bad yourself, my ambassador," the woman smiled and said, putting her hands on his shoulders.

This woman was a noble merchant Yorko met in a border city of the Kingdom of Dawn. Different from the Kingdom of Graycastle, most nobles in this kingdom had their own business and a rich merchant had a status like a noble since the wealth was comparable to noble titles here. The Kingdom of Dawn was also the main producer of agricultural products and the biggest exporter of textiles among the four kingdoms. Yorko had crammed for his job as an ambassador, studying the history and customs of this neighboring country for a long time before he set out. He knew that playing dumb now and then could please women but being an idiot who knew nothing would not.

The female merchant's name was Denise Payton. She was about 35 or 36, but still had beautiful skin that was smooth and full of elasticity. She did her light brown hair up, and a wisp of her hair was dyed purple. Yorko found it quite weird when he first saw her, but now he thought it quite nice when he got used to it. As an unattended noblewoman who went on a long journey, Denise was naturally open to all kinds of fun.

Yorko spent only two days to become a good friend with her and then won her affection with a bottle of perfume. They became attached to each other after a one night stand and traveled together after that. Denise even pulled him into her own luxury coach.

"Oh, yeah, what's the best business in the City of Glow now?"

"Why? You want to do business here?"

"Because of my old friend, no, the respected king Wimbledon, I'd probably stay here for a long time, 10 years or even 20 years. As it's the city of merchants, I'd better be one of them, just like what you've told me..."

"Good nobles are good merchants," Dennis added.

"Yes, good nobles are good merchants. In the Kingdom of Graycastle, an ambassador was equivalent to an earl in status. Having such a title, how can I not do business?" Yorko said while clapping his hands and smiling.

"That's right. The most popular goods on the market of the king's city can be divided into two types. One type is the utensils that you used every day but not the ordinary things, such as crystal glasses, spectacles, perfumes and fine fabrics. The second type is the novelties. There're no standard prices for these kinds of things. How much you can earn depends on how much your customers like them. Trade exhibitions will be held every weekend in the city. Exhibitions of different classes have different entrance



requirements." Denise whispered in Yorko's ear.

"It sounds interesting!" Yorko said and his eyes brightened.

"It's indeed interesting. You never know what you'll see at the exhibitions. If you're interested, I'll take you to the top one, but there's another business that has overtaken those two types recently." Denise paused momentarily to arouse his interest and then continued, "The slave trade."

"Slaves? Aren't they very common for cargo?" he was dazed for a moment and asked.

"I said 'recently'. A business that requires no capital is always the best. You've heard that the church had almost conquered the Kingdom of Wolfheart? Thousands of refugees flock into the Kingdom of Dawn. You can take them to the market and sell them out to make a lot of money. As long as you offer them food. Now, many merchants have gone to the border to make money in the refugee tide, since when the war is over, there'll be no more chances." The female merchant explained.

"But why did you go the border of the Kingdom of Graycastle?" Yorko asked.

"I don't like trading people... especially women." Denise shrugged.

"So, leave it alone. No capital doesn't mean no risk. When the

refugees become mobs, it'll be a real headache for the slave traders." Yorko said, holding her in his arms.

"You seem to really know something about business," she said while covering her mouth.

Just at that moment, the coachman in front of their carriage said, "My lady, we've arrived at the palace district."

"Let's call it a day." Yorko kissed her hard and continued, "Our time on the road was so sweet though it was very short. I'll bear it in my heart."

"Won't you come to my place and have a rest?" Denise said while ogling him.

"No, I have to go. I'm here on official business."

Yorko had to refuse her. Knowing that she was a married woman, he did not want to get beat up if her husband found out something when he visited Denise at their place. Yorko hurriedly hopped off the coach and waved to her, saying, "I feel we're going to meet again."

"I also think so and maybe we're going to meet sooner than you expect," she said while raising her eyebrow.

"Huh?"

Denise drew the curtain and left with a smile.

Seeing Yorko got off the coach, the emissary delegation that had followed behind the caravan now walked slowly towards him. "You really deserve the name of Magic Hand. What did you talk about for all these days?!" Hill Fawkes came up and exclaimed.

Hill was assigned by His Majesty Roland to work as Yorko's guard. He did not look like a military man at all, but even Yorko had heard that Hill had outstanding meritorious achievements before. "Business, of course. What else could I talk about with a merchant?" Yorko replied.

In fact, business was just a subject to start a conversation with the woman. Knowing what made a woman light up was the quickest way to get closer to her and Yorko could always sell what a woman bought, no matter it was language or a gift.

"What're you going to do now?"

"Hoist the flag of Hightower and hand in the document. Tell them the ambassador of the Kingdom of Graycastle has come!" Yorko said with an air of contentment.

# Chapter 565: A Delay

---

The welcome reception did not start until dusk.

The guests were warmly received at the palace hall by Deegan Moya, the first son of King of Dawn.

It was Yorko's first time to attend such an exquisite banquet. The entire hall, bright as day, was lit by numerous candles and oil lamps that dazzled like stars. There was a wide-open skylight window next to each of the chandeliers hanging down from the ceiling, which drove away the sultriness from the room.

Tables covered with white draperies were arranged in the shape of staircases that were littered with all sorts of glassware. There were red wines which glistened in the candlelight and glowed like rubies. The hall was so extravagantly lavished with silver mirrors and goldware that it looked as magnificent as the palace of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

Nevertheless, what drew Yorko's attention most was those noble ladies wandering among gentlemen.

Some of them were young and innocent, while some corpulent and mature. Each of the ladies, whether they put their hair up or not, had a strand of highlight hidden underneath the accessories. Yorko thought of Denise and realized it was a style currently in fashion among nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn.

In addition to their hair, most of the ladies were wearing tight

silk dresses that perfectly showcased their graceful bodies. Glints of fleeting light twinkled when they strolled across the room. Unlike the gowns girls normally wore in the Kingdom of Graycastle, these dresses were off-shoulder and cut above knees, beguiling and seductive.

Yorko was overjoyed. "It was indeed the right choice to come here."

Compared with reserved noble ladies in the Kingdom of Graycastle, the ones in the Kingdom of Dawn were exceptionally cordial.

Nonetheless, they showed affections only to good-looking young men and knights rather than plain nobles like him. Yet this was never a problem for Yorko, for he never relied on his appearance to attract women.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Dawn." A slightly pale young man escorted by a large crowd came up to him. "I've read the introduction letter from Roland Wimbledon and the document issued by him. So, he has now unified the whole Kingdom of Graycastle?"

Needless to say, this man was the host of the banquet, Prince Appen Moya.

Yorko placed his hand on the chest. Since he represented the royal family of the Kingdom of Graycastle, he was not required to kneel. Yorko was a little surprised as he bowed. It was

understandable that the king asked his eldest son to host the event since he might be caught up in some political affairs. However, it was kind of uncivil to let his son directly read the letter from His Majesty Roland. On a more serious note, it could be even considered as a diplomatic mischief.

Yorko answered Prince Appen's question and then asked pretty reluctantly, "Well, how is your father... "

"He's ill, very ill." Appen sighed. "That's why he couldn't receive you in person."

"I, I'm very sorry to hear that."

"No worries... Everybody in the City of Glow knows the king's been ill. He collapsed during a banquet one and a half month ago and has been sick ever since. He's only conscious for two or three hours per day and insensible for the rest of the time."

One and half a month ago... That was around the same time he set out from the king's city. "I'm sure His Majesty will be better. Please don't worry about it too much." Yorko comforted.

"Thank you." The prince managed to summon up a smile. "Enjoy yourself. I'll ask the ceremonial officer to arrange accommodation for you later."

"Thank you." While Appen was about to leave, Yorko suddenly thought of the real purpose of his trip. He ventured hastily. "Your

Highness, what about the alliance between the Kingdom of Dawn and the Kingdom of Graycastle?"

"I've heard about this matter too. But my father is currently too frail to deal with political affairs. Let's hold off on that until he's better."

Yorko was slightly relieved after the prince and his fellows walked off.

It appeared that he was quite a competent ambassador by nature. He did not make noticeable mistakes during his first meeting with a royal family member of high rank, although things did not go as well as he had expected. However, it did not really bother him, because he would live in the city for a pretty long time regardless and Moya IV could not remain sick for the next few years.

He should, instead, take this opportunity to pay more attention to the beauties in the hall.

"We've met again, Mr. Ambassador." While Yorko was pondering, he heard a familiar voice coming from behind.

Startled, he turned around abruptly and found Denise Payton, the businesswoman with whom he had spent a great deal of time with on the way here.

"How come..."

"I told you that we'd meet again." She smiled while raising a glass of red wine. "Cheers, to our reunion."

Yorko hurriedly glanced about to make sure no noble was staring in this direction.

"Are you looking for my husband?" Denise raised her brows. "Relax. He's not entitled to attend this reception."

"Are you saying..."

"I'm the one who manages the Payton Family, not him," Denise said bluntly, "and there're more than enough housemaids for him to indulge in. He's not allowed to seek pleasure outside without my permission."

[That's the reason...] Yorko's heart lightened. It seemed that Denise was the real heir of the Payton Family. In order to inherit the family, the daughter would normally seek a partner, often a diminished noble, to live with her. Due to the huge difference in their status, it was usually the male partner that changed his name.

"You should have told me earlier." Yorko put on a relieved look. "I don't want to split up such an affectionate couple and interfere with your special relationship."

"Really?" Denise smiled. "It wasn't special when you held out your hand to me." She paused for a moment and then asked, "Do



you have any plans after the banquet?"

"Well, I guess no," Yorko answered while winding an arm around her dainty waist, "if you invite me."

"Then I know a good place."

"All up to you, darling."

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After the banquet, Otto pulled Prince Appen aside, looking quite confused. "I don't understand, Your Highness. Even if His Majesty is ill, you can still enter into an alliance with the Kingdom of Graycastle, as this is also what your father intends to do. Why do you want to set the matter aside? With the church putting pressure on us, it isn't a good idea to fight alone."

"I've heard that father asked you to meet with Timothy Wimbledon rather than Roland Wimbledon?"

"We're allying with the King of Graycastle. The ambassador has also confirmed that Roland is the new king of our neighbor."

Appen Moya nodded. "You did a great job on the confidential trip to the Kingdom of Graycastle. But I have my own thoughts on the alliance. Leave it to me."

"Your Highness!"

"You don't understand." Appen interrupted. "I'm, for the sake of the Kingdom of Dawn..."

"It's for the safety of the Kingdom that we need someone to help us stop the attacks from the church!"

"I said leave it to me!"

Appen could not help raising his voice.

"I'm sorry. I lost my composure."

As the prince insisted, he had no choice but acquiesce. Just as he turned around, Appen suddenly questioned him. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Otto was silent for a moment and then answered, "Yes. Andrea, Belinda, Oro and me... all of us are your friends."

"If father can't make it," Appen spoke slowly, "you'll help me to the throne, right?"

# Chapter 566: A Promise and A Mission

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Otto Luoxi locked himself in the study after he returned home.

He did not understand why things had turned out this way.

Ever since the king had been ill, Appen appeared to have been in a great shock until recently, when he was finally able to recollect himself. But the way he spoke and the manner in which he conducted himself were somewhat different than before.

To put it more accurately, he had become rather unfamiliar to Otto.

As Appen's playmate, Otto believed that he knew the prince very well. Appen was not that type of power-hungry person who would attain his ends regardless of the means. Sometimes he even felt the prince was too juvenile to be a competent king. Because of this, he planned to, in collaboration with Belinda and Oro, fully support Appen and help him with governmental duties after the prince ascended the throne. After all, the three families had been assisting the king since the foundation of the Kingdom of Dawn.

That was the reason he had replied "Yes" without hesitation.

However, Otto found that Appen did not care about his answer.

He asked him that question simply out of a sense of insecurity.

Although the three families were very willing to support the royal family, he had never thought about whether His Highness really needed their assistance.

At this thought, Otto felt Appen more distant.

He breathed a long sigh. Perhaps he should take the initiative to do something about it.

But what should he do?

Neither pharmacists nor alchemists could do anything about the king's illness. He had no knowledge of medical treatment and certainly could not completely ease Appen's mind.

[Or cheer the prince up?] Otto pondered.

He had vainly tried numerous times to do so. Perhaps it was impossible to raise the prince's spirits by himself.

The three families must cooperate and work together. Only in this way were they possibly able to find the reason behind Appen's behavior.

With this thought, Otto got to his feet abruptly and walked out.

"Master, it's late now. Where are you going?" The steward trotted to him as he passed through the hall.

"To Tokat's place. I'm staying over!"

...

Otto knew every turn of the road leading to the territory of the Tokats'. As Otto knew Tokat well, nobody in the mansion stopped him. Otto went straight to the martial arts room. As he expected, Oro Tokat was practicing with his guards.

"Hey, what brought you here?" Oro took off the sweaty headband and tossed the guard his wooden sword. "You need a wingman?"

"I have something to tell you."

He pulled Oro to the resting room next door where he spilled out his thoughts and plan. At length, he asked, "What do you think?"

"To find out why Appen has become so weird?" Oro twitched his mouth. "Sorry, I'm not interested."

"Hey, you..."

"He's a prince, the successor of the King of Dawn. He'll not be our buddy forever, don't you understand?" Oro shook his head. "Plus, Appen is 20 years old. He isn't a seven or eight-year-old any longer. We don't have the obligation to cheer him up every time he's ill-tempered. If he doesn't want to spill his guts, and then fine, I don't

want to be nosey."

"Aren't you planning to assist Appen Moya?"

"It'll be called 'assistance' only if His Highness needs it. Otherwise, you're just being annoying."

[Did he also notice the change in the prince?] Otto thought with a quiver. "But we three families always support Moya..."

"Three families?" Oro smiled carelessly. "After Andrea died, there are only you and me." He turned around and walked out while waving his hand. "Since you're here, let me take you to Crimson Dream. Get yourself laid and forget about these trifles. You look so stressed."

"Andrea is alive."

Oro stopped abruptly.

[Sorry.] Otto apologized in silence. He had failed to keep Andrea's secret.

"Andrea Quinn is still alive." He repeated. "I saw her in Border Town when I went to the Kingdom of Graycastle."

Oro instantly turned around and dashed to him, almost pushing him to the wall.

"What, what did you say? Is, is it true?"

"I saw her with my own eyes. She's with Prince Roland Wimbleton."

"With Prince Roland Wimbleton..." Oro's eyes were wide open. "Like they're in a relationship?"

"I don't know." Oro bit his lip. "But she's become a witch. Only Prince Roland is willing to accept witches out of the entire Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Hang on. You said 'witch'?" Oro was stunned. "What actually happened at that time?"

Otto Luoxi related all the details of what Andrea had experienced back then. He felt the sweetness of revenge as he watched Oro torn by his emotions. It was too late for Oro to do anything about it now because he firmly believed that the Quinns had fallen off the cliff at that time. Now, Andrea would fall in love with neither of them.

"That was the reason her father made it look like an unfortunate accident and had people believe that Andrea fell off the cliff..." Greatly depressed, Oro threw himself on the floor after hearing the story. "Damn! Why have I never thought of opening up her grave and looking into the matter?"

[Such a... cunning guy!] Oro snapped in silence. "Ahem.

Therefore, we can see an urgent need to cheer Prince Appen up." Otto reminded him.

Oro gave his friend a side look. "Huh? What's the connection between these two incidents?"

"Of course there's a connection! Think about it. Appen's hesitating about forming an alliance between the two nations, and he didn't even give an explicit reason. If the plan of joint defense fails, we'll have to fight against the church alone in the event of an attack. If the church invades the Kingdom of Dawn first, you'll take the knights to defend the country, won't you?" Otto asked.

"Absolutely. It's my duty."

"If you're killed in action, you won't see Andrea again, correct?"

"Um, it sounds kind of rational. No, how can you be so sure that I'll be killed?" Oro challenged indignantly.

"Even the Kingdom of Wolfheart, whose people are famous for their strength and power, has been defeated by the church. What're your odds of winning?" Otto ignored his friend's protest and continued, "If the church, contrarily, attacks the Kingdom of Graycastle first, Roland has to fight back, right? If he's dead, Andrea will very likely die with him. Even if she's caught alive by the church, she'll suffer tortures more miserable than a clean death. If the two nations, however, enter into an alliance and agree to offer mutual assistance, the church won't boldly launch an attack. Both you and Andrea will be alive and will probably see



each other in the future. In this light, do you still think the alliance is significant?"

"Yes..."

"We need the prince to help with that. Now, do you still think the two matters are relevant?"

"Yes."

"Are you in?"

Oro answered resolutely, "Yes!"

With these words, Otto and Oro clasped each other's hands tightly.

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Yorko returned to his lodge, exhausted but pleased. As he pushed the bedroom door open, he heard a voice from inside. "You're finally back."

Yorko was shocked. Who would sneak in his room and wait for him right after his arrival at the Kingdom of Dawn? Could it be Denise's husband who married into the family? He was still debating whether he should run away or plead for mercy when the man lit the candle and walked to him. It was Hill Fawkes in the

candlelight.

"You scared the hell out of me. Do you know?" Yorko heaved a long sigh. "Whatever you've got to say, can't you wait till tomorrow?"

"We can only talk unnoticed at nighttime." Hill threw up his hands. "Please understand that I have a habit of being cautious."

"Alright then." Although Hill was his guard, he was appointed to him by Roland and could not be treated as any other guards. "Well, say what you want to say since you're already here."

"It's now a good opportunity to recruit talents among the refugees from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. You can view it as a business and hire masons, literates, and anyone who has an expertise. His Majesty will disburse you all the necessary expenses. You'll get five silver royals for each person you hire."

"For God's sake, I know nothing about business! I talked to Denise just for a casual chat. You don't think I'll be really trafficking refugees, do you?" Yorko put his hand on the forehead. "Plus, slaves are usually traded on the border of the two nations. It doesn't look nice for me to go there as an ambassador!"

"This is His Majesty's order," Hill said in a steady tone. "You don't need to leave City of Glow. Tradesmen will sooner or later transfer slaves here, although at a higher price. It saves you trouble to screen them. As to the business side of the matter, you can discuss with Denise Payton. She's quite a well-known businesswoman

around this area. It's a piece of cake for her to send refugees to the Kingdom of Graycastle. "We'll benefit a lot once the transportation route is determined. For example, we can disguise ourselves as tradesmen and retreat unnoticed when facing unexpected danger."

Yorko's jaw dropped. "Have you been to the capital of the Kingdom of Dawn?"

Hill shook his head.

"Then how do you know such details?"

"I was collecting information from people on the street while you were busy socializing."

"I thought you were just a great knight. I didn't know you're also a good tradesman." Yorko smacked his lips.

"I'm neither a warrior nor a tradesman, but I can protect you when there's a crisis. This is also what His Majesty entrusted me to do."

"So you are..."

"Just an ordinary... acrobat," Hill answered while smiling.

# Chapter 567: Explosive Shells

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A suburb beyond the west city wall, Neverwinter.

A great roar attracted the civilians to ascend the city wall to watch from up high. The First Army had sealed the entrances to the Misty Forest in case anyone broke into the experiment ground.

Although the location was not close to the city wall, one could clearly see what was happening with a telescope from there. "It seems we have to look for a remote place as a special base for testing firearms." Roland thought to himself.

"Your Majesty, the second volley is ready!" An artillery soldier reported.

"Everybody goes into the bunker." Roland waved his hand. "Start the countdown after confirming no one is on the ground."

It was the test fire of the 152 mm Howitzer. While researching on the Sigil of Magic Stones, Roland included the advancement of firearms. Now with Timothy being killed and the Northern Region having announced submission, the situation in the Kingdom of Graycastle was fairly good. Now Roland had time to put his mind on further promoting the shells.

But he had to admit that the technical difficulties of developing a howitzer with an impact detonator were much greater than those of developing solid shells. Anna would make four howitzer shells for test fire every day. Yet three consecutive days later, none had

successfully exploded. What's worse, on the second day, one shell exploded right after it got out of the chamber, which damaged the new artillery barrel too much for test firing. Fortunately, Roland took precautions by digging several trenches around the experiment ground, which successfully prevented casualties. The eardrums of a few soldiers who stayed close to the artillery were damaged by the roar, but Nana healed them in time.

"Is this thing really like what you said, exploding the moment it touches the enemy?" Agatha could not help but stick her head out to watch. "I've asked Anna. It's nothing but a few pieces of sheet metal put together. It's not alive, so how can it know whether it touches is an enemy?"

Agatha must be the most enthusiastic witch toward weapon test in the union. Upon hearing the test, she put aside her production work in the chemical plant and personally came to observe the research development of the new shell.

"It doesn't explode when it touches the enemy, but when it falls into the enemy's position." Roland corrected her. "It's a basic requirement the Howitzer has to meet—if there isn't a safety to make sure of it, the shell could fire accidentally at any time. That would be too dangerous."

The trigger safety was the most basic technology for the new shell, at the same time the focal point of the test.

To prevent explosions triggered by collision or accidental drop, Roland made great efforts to set three safety systems.

The first one was to separate, store, and transport the fuses and shells, and install them when needed. The fuse looked like a cone with a handle and was the size of a fist. With the threads on its bottom, it could be conveniently and easily screwed into the notch on top of the shell. The shell was filled with double base chemical gunpowder, a kind of material that was hard to ignite without a detonator, which essentially ensured the logistics work.

The second one was the inertia safety in the fuse.

The safety device resembled a gate lock. Unarmed, it could not move due to being held in place by a stiff spring; when the shell was fired, the tremendous inertia kicked back the lock cylinder, overcoming the resistance of the spring, pulling open the latch, and removing the safety.

The theory was easy, yet hard to put into practice. Roland and the witches spent most of the first two days on it. If the spring was too hard, the lock cylinder could not get enough recoil distance; if it was too soft, it could not guarantee safety. Anna had to gradually adjust it based on the test results. After eight rounds of test firing, they finally attained the relatively reliable statistics on the compressibility of the spring.

The last one was the centrifugal primer-detonator.

It was also the device with the most technology in the fuse. Simply put, it embedded the detonator in a coin-sized half-circle iron plate. Normally, while being fixed by a spring, the detonator

would stand in the middle of the fuse at an angle. With such a set-up as this, the firing pin, detonator, and explosive powder were not aligned. This way, even if the shell fell off from high above, the firing pin would not touch the detonator, so as to prevent accidental explosions. Only when the latch was separated from the lock in the second safety, could the iron plate be mobilized.

After being shot, the grenade spun at a drastically high speed because of the rifling in the barrel. Under the centrifugal force, the tilting detonator gradually stood upright, just like a spinning top whose center of gravity gradually closed on its axis line. This process completed after the bullet had left the muzzle for 200 or 300 meters, so even if the muzzle was stuck or the bullet ran into tree branches, it would not detonate prematurely.

When the detonator returned to the upright position, it aligned with the firing pin and explosive powder. Under this circumstance, once the fuse touched the ground, the firing pin instantly inserted into the detonator, and then the explosive powder pushed the super-hot gunpowder into the warhead, which in turn exploded the surrounding enemies into pieces.

The advantage of the centrifugal safety lay in the fact that if the shell failed to explode, without the centrifugal force the detonator would be popped back to its original tilting position by the spring, which made the retrieving work much safer.

Besides, if the entire grenade was grasped or accidentally found by the enemy, it could only be used as a normal solid shell when it could not get enough centrifugal force from not being fired in a conventional manner. As for tearing it apart and replicating it,

that would be merely impossible.

"Prepare to fire. Start countdown at five."

An observer gave the order.

The repeatedly lengthened lanyard was gradually tightened while the gunner in the trench retrieved the rope bit by bit.

"Fire!"

As the gunner yanked on the rope, the ground instantly trembled.

A roar and fierce wind from the muzzle passed across the spectators' heads. Roland felt numerous soil particles rushed at his collar. Even if he had his ears solidly covered, he could feel tremors coming through his feet.

"Found the falling point. Explosion failed. Repeat. Explosion failed."

Lightning's voice came from the Sigil of Listening in Nightingale's hand.

"I see. We'll be right there," she replied and took out a Magic Stone.



"... We failed again?" Agatha said with disappointment.

"Failure is too common while experimenting." Anna consoled her. "As soon as we find the correct direction, we can guarantee success in mass production."

"Nicely put." Roland praised her while patting her head. "Besides, now with the help of Summer and Sylvie, the research and development speed is astonishing."

Even in modern times, it was common if thousands of shells were fired during the grenade testing, so to find any problems with two to three shots was like mission impossible.

Reaching the falling point of the bullet, Anna cut the fuse with Blackfire to ensure the safety of the payload. The soldiers then collected the failed shell. Either the gunpowder or the metal shell could be recycled, so it would be a waste to throw them away.

"Summer, it's your turn," Roland said with a gesture.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Summer nodded. Exhibiting her playback ability, the phantom of a shell that was about to fall to the ground instantly appeared in front of everybody.

Although Summer's magic power was still at a low level—after four months' of practicing, she could only use it four times per day—with precise control on the magic power, she could fix the playback image at an exact moment.

Such an ability was to perfectly replay the scene. In other words, Sylvie could see the inside of the phantom—except being intangible, it had no difference from the real scene.

With the help of Summer and Sylvie, Roland was able to determine the spring tension after only eight rounds of test firing.

# Chapter 568: The Dry Distillation Tower

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"Um..." Sylvie carefully examined the shell and checked it against Roland's design for a long time. She pointed at the detonator and said, "It seems this bronze tube is not aligned with the nail on the top."

"How about the spring?" asked Anna. "Is it still stuck at both sides of the iron pan?"

"One has gone bad."

"To the left or the right?"

Anna asked about every detail, and then wrote all the problems down in a notebook.

After collecting the reasons leading to the failure, they began the next round of test firing, where Summer's playback ability could be used four times. Thus the efficiency of the improvement had become unprecedentedly high.

Unfortunately, the next two rounds of test shooting failed again. Roland had to declare that the testing would continue the next day.

To Summer and Sylvie, their work for the day was finished. Afterwards, they could either go back to the castle to enjoy a delicious afternoon tea or go to the Convenience Market to check for novel goods. But to Anna and Agatha, the test firing of the

grenade was merely a small part of their tight schedule, especially to Anna. She not only had to improve the fuse based on the reasons that were found to have led to failure, but she also needed to finish the research and assembly of the steam turbine.

Roland had planned to follow her to the North Slope backyard to check the turbine model, yet his guard Sean brought a piece of news from the City Hall.

"Your Majesty, Lesya, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Construction, wished for you to visit the Furnace Area. He said he had completed the construction of the first oven for dry distillation."

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As the necessary equipment of the coking plant, 10 towers for dry distillation were planned, and they were to be located around the furnace cluster at the foot of the North Slope Mine area.

Due to the over-cutting of trees for the burning of bricks and iron making, the area that the furnace cluster took up enlarged from the original open space of less than 1,000 square meters to a wide open area stretching along the mountain. If Roland had not strictly prohibited the cutting of trees near the town, none of the trees at the northern part of the Border Area would have survived.

Although coal had been found, charcoal that was easy to get was still the major fuel for iron making. With trees available getting further and further from the furnace cluster, the workers targeted

the top of North Slope Mountain. Every day there were hundreds of logs cut off and rolled down from the mountaintop. Watching from a distance, it looked like the green peak had a small "bald spot".

Normally, Roland would not ask the workers to protect the environment in this matter. As long as the dust that would have risen did not affect the town, he would not care even if all the trees on North Slope Mountain were cut down. After all, to the Impassable Mountain Range, this protruding mountain range was nothing but an insignificant corner. With Leaf maintaining the basic vegetation, there was no need to worry about soil erosion.

As to the ground reclaimed at the foot of the mountain, it naturally became the most suitable building sites for coking plants.

Followed by Nightingale and his guards, Roland walked through the noisy Furnace Area and reached the first tower for dry distillation. Lesya walked up to welcome Roland instantly, bowed and said, "Your Majesty, as you demanded, I've constructed this double layer furnace with refractory bricks. According to the drawing, the upper layer should be sealed with an iron gate while the interlayer should be equipped with a mobile iron plate. But I don't know who can make them. The same is true of the copper pipe and chimney on the small side furnace. Apart from these metal components, the rest has been completed."

Roland lowered his head and went to the interior of the furnace to have a thorough examination. He was totally impressed by what he saw. He had to admit that Lesya, the former member of the Mason Guild, the old friend of Karl Van Bate, was indeed excellent

at masonry. The inner walls of this nearly six-meter high tower for dry distillation was evenly constructed; the spaces between bricks were all of similar thickness; the bricks were all interlaced, without two layers of verticals seams aligned. One could see that Lesya's laying skill was extraordinary and his working attitude was very serious. After all, the products different people made could be drastically different, even if they referred to the same drawing.

"Well done." After the examination, Roland praised him saying, "I'll arrange the cast of the iron gate and iron plate. You'll only need to cover with refractory bricks on the side exposed to fire."

"Your Majesty," hesitating for a while, Lesya asked, "could you please tell me how the furnace operates?"

"Why? Do you wish to become a coking worker?" Roland said jokingly.

"Of course not." Lesya hurriedly shook his head. "Since I've never built such a strange furnace, I had to build according to my speculation for the places that I wasn't sure of on the drawing. So if I can understand its function and working mechanism, not only can I finish the second furnace faster, but also I can improve the places that I wasn't sure about before."

[Ah, that's his reasons.] Roland thought and said smilingly, "This kind of furnace is mainly used for the dry distillation of coal. You must have seen how the charcoal is burned. The burning of coal is similar but on a bigger scale. The lower layer is for burning, the upper layer is for baking, and both layers use coal as filling."

"Baking coal with coal?" Lesya surprisedly asked.

"That's right. After the dry distillation, coal can be transformed into coke. Coke can reach a higher temperature while burning, which makes it a better fuel for smelting steel. In addition, the process of dry distillation will create several by-products. The pipes on the tower wall are used to collect them, rather than to exhaust gases as a chimney does.

"Then... why do you build a small furnace at the side of the main furnace?"

"No air is allowed on the upper layer during the dry distillation, otherwise the coal will directly burst into flames." Roland pointed at the reserved holes between the two furnaces and said, "While burning, the limestone in the small furnace will produce a large amount of carbon dioxide—you can consider it as a sort of non-flammable gas..."

"Your Majesty, I know that," Lesya said, "I learned it from the night classes."

[That'll be easy then.] Roland felt gratified. [It seems that the universal education has broadened its content under the effort of Scroll.] He continued, "Through the pipes, the carbon dioxide will reach the upper layer of the furnace and push away the air, and then the coal can be dry distilled. As for the limestone, the off-white stones burned to make cement, are all over the North Slope Mountain."

...

After examining the dry distillation tower number one, Roland retraced his steps. On the way back, he took a short break at the Furnace Area.

Seeing this busy scene, Roland could not help but feel thrilled. Standing side by side, the various brick furnaces looked like an orderly red forest. Rising from the forest were tens of entangled gray, white, and black smoke columns, which constituted a rather modern picture when seen together with the plainly dressed workers and outdated equipment. Over ten steam engines were roaring, dragging the conveyor belt to carry chunks of materials and charcoals into the blast furnace. A track system was paved from the mine to the furnace and many mine wagons traveled between the two stops. The speed of transportation had greatly improved.

After finishing the construction of the steel plant and forge plant, this place would be another core location of City of Neverwinter. Ore exploitation and steel smelting proceeded the transformation of the steel into various raw materials which were then transported to processing plants. These processes symbolized an industrial flower arising from here. The human beings were bestowed with extraordinarily refining powers, which consequently gave them the courage to conquer everything.



# Chapter 569: Power Threatened

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As the desolate spring came to an end, summer was drawing near. The population growth rate of City of Neverwinter enjoyed its first explosive peak.

The mission of attracting refugees in the southern and eastern areas began to take effect. With the experience from the previous year, the working efficiency of the envoy teams greatly increased. Every day, hundreds of refugees gathered in Redwater City and Willow Town, waiting for the boats from the Western Region to transfer them to City of Neverwinter, which was said to be rich and stable.

In order to appropriately accommodate these people, the City Hall also commissioned businessmen to rent temporary barracks at the gathering place, and offered porridge and water, to prevent any accidents before the refugees arrived at the Western Region.

The pier of the Border Area had become the busiest location of the city. Ninety percent of the police were dispatched to maintain order and register the population. There was always a long line of people in front of the barrier for medical inspections. The officers who were responsible for residential control divided the swarmed-in refugees into several categories and moved them into riverbank boardrooms, west-city cave dwellings, and formal residences accordingly.

For this reason, City Hall turned into a bustling place every day.

"Three sailing ships from Redwater City just arrived at the pier, 126 people are on board, a blue flag is hanging on the mast, and Bob is in charge."

"Again? How many batches have arrived today?"

"Four or five batches? Stop nagging. Go and receive them."

"Well, who'll take over Bob's job and go to Redwater City?"

"I will. Hang on, I'll be ready right away."

"Take some soap with you. You can't buy any there."

Listening to the noisy chatters outside of his office, Barov felt distressed, not because he was too busy though. Usually, when he worked in the City Hall, more work brought him more pleasure.

But recently, the situation had become complicated.

The reason lay in Edith Kant.

"Director, the Ministry of Justice is urging us for more personnel again," an assistant walked into his office and said. "His Excellency Carter asked us to recruit another 100 people as backup policemen. He said if he doesn't get more hands, the city's order will be out of control. If anything happens and His Majesty asks, we should take the blame as well."

[Now that he's the Chief Knight, he could put more words in front of His Majesty.] Barov thought to himself. But for minor stuff like this, he did not have time to attend. While drafting a document, Barov said without raising his head, "Put it on the desk. I'll handle it later."

"Yes, sir!"

As the assistant left the room, Edith's voice sounded in his ears. "Is this the recruitment order? Since you're too busy, let me help you with it."

[Here she is!] Barov moaned in his heart. [Not even using honorifics.]

[Of course, Edith is the daughter of Duke of the Northern Region, a status much higher than mine. Before I became the real Hand of the King, she could address me by name without using any respectful form. But no matter what, I'm about half a mentor to her, because His Majesty arranged for her to be an assistant to learn the departmental framework and government process of the City Hall in my office. Yet it seems she doesn't think so.]

"Um... okay, that's fine," he said involuntarily.

No matter how reluctant he felt, he could not find any mistake in Miss Kant's behavior. If he repeatedly rejected her, he would appear in the wrong. Especially at this crucial moment, he could not risk leaving any bad impression on His Majesty.

He should never forget that Roland Wimbledon was a man with great insight.

"Thanks."

Soon, rustling sounds of writing came from the opposite desk.

Several minutes later, Edith put the recruitment order back onto Barov's desk.

"Judging from the drafts I went through recently, such recruitment orders usually require the personnel to be reliable and have a clean slate, but there aren't many such candidates left in the Border Area. Compared with posting recruitment bulletins on the square and asking for the candidates to apply for work at the City Hall, it'd be better if we extract the files of registered residence in the archives and select 100 unemployed locals. The Ministry of Justice is a large department in the City Hall. It provides relatively good salary and welfare. I think no one would turn down such a job offer. In this way, we'll save about a week over recruiting through normal procedures, and will, in turn, decrease the complaints from Chief Knight. If you approve it, I'll reply it on this recruitment order and give it to the archives."

Her voice was clear and sensible. It was hard to imagine that she joined City Hall only two weeks ago.

In the beginning, she was just quietly sitting aside and watching Barov review documents, seldom saying anything. But now, she

could handle all sorts of affairs in the City Hall with high proficiency.

"Um... do it your way then."

For the moment, Barov could not find a better solution than Edith's suggestion. With his tight schedule, it would be possible that he ignored such petty things and just handled it in the usual way.

[Is this how a successor turned out to be after growing up in a duke's mansion and educated by the upper-level noble?]

Barov felt greatly threatened.

Yes, honorifics and respect were just minor details. What he really cared about was the power in his hands. [Now the propaganda that calls for submission is all over the Northern Region. If Edith is sent by His Majesty as an assistant to help set up a secondary City Hall in the Northern Region in the future, it would be no big deal. But what if she stays?]

[His Majesty is not yet married, and Edith is the daughter of a duke!]

At this thought, Barov could not help but feel distressed.

[This won't work. I must make her know that the management work in the City Hall can't be mastered that easily. His Majesty

needs a minister who's able to take the whole situation into account.]

When Edith returned to the office, Barov cleared his throat and handed her a statistics form.

"What's... "

"We're in trouble," Barov said with a low voice. "The grain stock in City of Neverwinter might not last until the wheat bumper harvest day."

"Um, is it caused by an overflow of population?" Edith glanced at the form and said, "According to the consumption rate, the remaining grain should be able to last until the end of the summer. We can harvest the spring wheat in the middle of July. It should be enough if we stop accepting new refugees."

"But the City Hall can't stop accepting new refugees."

"Because of the population target of 100,000 set by His Majesty?"

"No, that's not the point," Barov said while shaking his head. "There's still a constant flow of refugees from both the east and south sides of the country to the gathering place. If we abandon them, not only will Redwater City and Willow Town face the risk of a riot, but also the image we worked hard to build up will be destroyed overnight. If we ever want to recruit refugees again, it'll be very difficult. His Majesty once revealed to me that the

realization of his development plan needs a large number of people. 100,000 subjects are just the beginning, so the City Hall won't disrupt His Majesty's plan because of the grain problem. We must tackle this problem and it's also my responsibility as a minister." He paused, and then looked at Edith Kant. "Do you have any good ideas?"

# Chapter 570: Edith's Reasons

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In a sense, there was no solution to this problem.

The reason lay in the fact that the total amount of grain was limited. After the Months of Demons, the circulating grain in the kingdom would enter a state of shortage. Grain prices would definitely soar, and there would be none to be found in the market. The grain shortage could not be relieved until the new wheat was harvested. Autumn was the season in which grain was most frequently traded. After that, when the Months of Demons began, the situation would just worsen again.

Of course, the grain transactions were usually among businessmen and nobles. As for those penniless refugees and Rats, they would have to get through the winter with an empty stomach regardless the amount of wheat present.

According to Barov's years' worth of experience as an assistant minister, businessmen in the major cities were waiting for the ears of wheat to mature. Before that, they were unlikely to sell the grains at hand in large amounts. What remained in their hands might be enough to feed a few thousands of people, but never for ten thousands of people.

"Since we can't find more resources, we need to tighten the consumption.

"Cut the city's grain supply and reduce each person's quota for daily purchase. Change the subjects' diet from bread to oatmeal,



and keep it that way till the day of bumper harvest. Those are the possible suggestions that Edith is going to make.

"Then I can refute her suggestions for the following reasons: they're against His Majesty's grain promises; they're contrary to the kingdom's intrinsic values; they might cause food panic and so on.

"Judging by Edith's expression, and reading the list with her eyebrows raised, I know she must feel it troublesome.

"It won't be long before she asks for my advice."

Thinking of this, Barov could not help but touch his beard. The so-called 'taking the whole situation into account' not only meant that the minister needed to be skilled and experienced in governmental affairs, but also needed to clearly know about the characteristics of the city. For example, when he was in King's City, he could recite the prices of the Alchemist Workshop's specialties, and the amount of Silver City's monthly silver ore shipment without hesitation. All those numbers could not be remembered in a short time.

The characteristic of City of Neverwinter was the witches.

Barov knew a green-haired woman called Leaf in the Witch Union who could make the wheat grow at an inconceivable rate. If not caring about the maintenance of the land, she could make the wheat ready for reaping within one day, and the ears they produced were not something that Golden Ones could compare to.

In other words, they only needed to ask her to manage a piece of wheat field for rapid production, and then the grain shortage could be easily solved.

Of course, he also knew that His Majesty had asked Leaf to control Misty Forest in the west, so as to build the early warning defensive line against demons. Given the emergence of such enemies, it needed several years, and so it would not matter much if Leaf took two to three months off.

But there was no way that Edith could know that information.

Even if she was super talented and took part in managing the Northern Region affairs since adulthood, there was no way that she could clearly know the city which was completely strange to her half a month ago, not to mention to know the abilities of each witch.

Also, she could not understand why the office of the Ministry of Education was adjacent to the archives, why the Minister of Education often appeared in the archives and had the authority to look at all the documents.

After a long while, Edith put down the list and slightly smirked.

"Actually, it's not a big deal."

"Em..." Barov nodded, then startled. "What?"

"Before the development of Deepvalley Town, most of the land in the Northern Region wasn't fit for wheat plantation. In every spring, grain shortage used to be very severe in this area, so the local lord set eyes on the Eastern Region and Kingdom of Dawn."

"You mean..." He suddenly realized something.

"Since they couldn't grow enough nor purchase any, the only choice left for them was to rob," Edith said with an easy tone. "Isn't it exactly the situation we're in? His Majesty's army is attacking Fallen Dragon Ridge. I heard Countess Spear's brother won over a lot of the local nobles in order to resist her. Is that right? Now that we have both the reasons and the means, we should directly go there and kill them one by one. Guess how many gold royals and grain is hidden in their basements."

"There's only a grain shortage because the amount circulating is too few. As a matter of fact, most of the grain output in the kingdom has been divided and taken by the nobles. They use that grain to control the freemen and farmers in their domains, and to earn many gold royals in a lean year." She did not talk fast, but yet her voice gave Barov a chill. "If we rake over Fallen Dragon Ridge, I think the problem of ten thousands of people's food will naturally be solved. If not, there are several cities in the Southeast Region awaiting His Majesty's ransack."

"But they're all nobles..." Barov shut his mouth before finishing talking. "That's right... After His Majesty took over the Southern Territory, they stopped being nobles. As long as we act fast enough, the captured grain will be able to refill the granary of City

of Neverwinter."

Besides, different from King's City, Fallen Dragon Ridge has completely fallen into His Majesty's control, which is also the crucial pass on the way to the Southern Territory. By then, not only will the City Hall send people to assist Countess Spear to establish a new government, but the inner city will also adopt the laws, urban planning, and education system of City of Neverwinter.

What confused Barov was how Edith could accept His Majesty's will of eliminating the nobles so quickly. Even for himself, it would take a much longer time to get used to wholeheartedly supporting His Majesty's orders... let alone her who was the successor to the Duke of the Northern Region.

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Edith returned to the Foreign Affairs Building. Pushing open the door, she saw Cole crouching on the desk and flipping through a thin book.

"What's that?"

"Um... I bought it from the convenience market. It looks like a picture book but it has stories. It's very interesting." The brother looked up. "You look happy."

"Do I?" Edith asked.

"In City of Evernight, you rarely smiled like this," Cole said, smirking. "Are we really not going back?"

"Only temporarily. Until father replies, His Majesty should allow you to return to the Northern Region." Edith sat down in front of him, closed the book to look at its cover and saw the words printed "The Witch Diaries".

"What about you then?"

"I'm going to stay here."

"Why?" Cold asked in bewilderment. "Is the City Hall that interesting?"

"What's interesting isn't the City Hall, but Roland Wimbledon's City Hall." She corrected him, smilingly. "Do you know how I got things done in City of Evernight?"

"You only had to tell father and it was done."

"More or less. I just gave an order, and then naturally there would be people who did it for me. When I think back to it, they did that not because of me, but because of my identity. They knew father would follow my suggestions... Of course, this only worked in the Kant Family's manor," Edith said with great enthusiasm, "but here, my identity not only doesn't help but rather hampers. There is barely any noble in the City Hall, and no one actually

cares whether I'm the daughter of the Duke of the Northern Region. Everybody is relying on his or her own capabilities. Do you understand what I mean?"

Cole shook his head.

"People are willing to listen to you, not because who you are, but because what you're capable of. This rule applies even out of your manor. His Majesty is right about one thing: Feudalism seems to give the nobles great power, but it also set an upper limit for their power. Judging from the current situation, His Majesty is totally capable of enlarging his domain into the entire continent, then the City Hall will turn into a huge institution, and its prefecture will expand into every corner of Graycastle. As long as you're recognized in this organization, this entire kingdom might just operate based on one word you said. So, why would I settle for that small manor?"

# Chapter 571: The Duke and Father

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"Edith, you cruel wretch!" Calvin, Duke of the Northern Region grabbed the teacup on the table, wanting to smash it onto the ground but suddenly stopped with his hand in the air. He felt a little reluctant since the cup was made of the best quality crystal glass and worth two or three gold royals.

After a thought, he gradually lowered his hand and put the cup back on the table.

Needing to worry about such minor gains and losses made him even more depressed.

Edith's letter was also put on the table. He could not believe what was written in it. Beyond all his expectations, His Majesty wanted to reclaim the power of the nobility and his daughter who had always brought him profits before this promised to obey the king without hesitation this time. Besides, she even persuaded him to recognize the fact and stop resisting in the letter.

He felt that she wrote to him as if he were already a captive.

The duke thought bitterly that his daughter must be putting others ahead of her own father.

The guard outside the door probably heard the noise and looked

in, asking, "my lord, what happened?"

"Get out, leave me alone!"

As Calvin was unwilling to vent his anger on the cup, he took out his fury on this guard who swiftly closed the door. The duke panted for a long time before he could return his gaze to the letter.

As he had eliminated the Howes Family and Lista Family, now he was in complete control of the whole Northern Region. If he chose to accept His Majesty's requirements, he would no longer be the ruler who dictated in this region and return to his original condition, or even worse.

But if he did not accept his daughter's suggestion, what would happen?

Edith also described the result of this choice in the letter.

"If you choose to do so, Cole and I will be doomed. He'll be held captive in prison forever, just like the heir of Duke Ryan. As for me, I'll end up even worse. What do you think Prince Roland will do to a defenseless daughter of a duke? I can list a series of tortments that'll excite a man without too much effort. When he gets tired of me, I'll be left in his dungeon to rot.

However, instead of worrying about me, you'd better worry about yourself first, since his army will besiege your city and your vassals and knights can hardly resist for half a day. After that, it'll



be impossible for you to be an ordinary person, let alone a duke. How is it? Are you going to make such an unwise choice?"

Calvin was familiar with this tone and he could even picture his daughter writing the letter with a sneer on her face. Whenever it came to failure, she would always describe her fate in an extremely cold tone as if she was waiting for the moment all the time and when she talked that way, Calvin was immediately swamped. He knew that she was apparently threatening him, but he could not lift his spirit up to scold her.

After all Edith Kant was his own daughter and the only child he had with his first wife.

Despite the fact that Edith exaggerated the matter, he still had to admit the possibility.

He himself had also heard lots about that dandy Prince Roland.

The duke gradually calmed down at this thought.

But he was still wondering whether the black steel machines were as incredible as she depicted or not.

He thought in surprise, "Edith used a whole sheet of paper among the three sheets of the letter to describe what she had seen in Border Town, oh no, in Neverwinter."

The description was even twice as much as that of His Majesty

Roland.

Edith claimed that the super powerful machines beyond imagination could easily complete tasks that were considered to be impossible by the ordinary people and that if they surrendered to the new king, the Northern Region would be able to import those black iron machines which would bring an earthshaking change to their domain.

Calvin could tell from the description that Edith thought highly of the machines.

In the last part of the letter, she suggested that Calvin should send His Majesty a formal document to take an oath of allegiance and to show the submission of the Northern Region to the new king, and meanwhile, dispatch servants who could read and write to learn the rules and regulations of the City Hall, getting the domain prepared for the new system.

"Besides, I sincerely hope that you can order Cole to stay in Neverwinter instead of calling him back to the Northern Region. If you agree, you can also send Lance here when he reaches an adult age. Given that the noble titles can no longer be inherited, only the men who well adapt to the new system of His Majesty can succeed the Kant Family and keep it thriving.

Your daughter, Edith"

After reading the letter, Calvin heaved a long sigh and put it away. He spread a new sheet of white paper.

Thinking that as Edith had already made the decision, he had to believe her and write His Majesty a letter showing his loyalty to the new king.

However, as a duke, he had to make his last efforts to ensure the family's profits. He believed that he would feel much relieved if he could bind the two families' interests together.

Such as... something like a marriage which would make his own daughter the queen.

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By the Redwater River, Border Area, City of Neverwinter.

The sun was sinking into the mountains bit by bit, leaving the river afire with golden light.

Smoke rose in front of the shacks, and a faint smell of porridge made Snaketooth's mouth begin to water.

As he got closer, he could even smell meat.

"I'm back!" He caught Tigerclaw's attention as soon as he stepped into the battalion. Tigerclaw said, "come up here quickly!"

Snaketooth swiftly walked to him and asked, "what? We have

meat today?"

"Yes, you come back late, so you've missed the message. This is granted by the lord."

Snaketooth rubbed his sore shoulders and said, "what for? You guys still need a long time to finish the construction of the residential area, right?"

"It's for the completion of the Kingdom Main Street! Now the Border Area and the Longsong Area are finally connected together. I've heard that now it takes only one day to get to the Longsong Area riding a horse. In the past, it would take three days," someone nearby came up and said.

Hearing that, Snaketooth nodded his head. Every time when a major project was finished, they would get a bowl of meat porridge, just like what he had heard before in the square. He had been in the Border Area for two months, during which the construction platoon had never canceled a meal or deducted salaries. Now, he had already accumulated 14 silver royals and would get 7 more in the end of this month.

When his savings reached one gold royal, he could get a house from the City Hall and become an official resident of City of Neverwinter instead of a Rat, a nobody.

However, to own that house, he still had to work for at least 20 more years.

Nevertheless, he was confident that he could find a better-paid job, such as a furnace worker or a bricklayer.

Everything seemed to get better.

But he had not met Paper yet.

"When you get the meat porridge, remember to eat fast. Otherwise, you can't get a good seat," Tigerclaw whispered in his ear.

"What... seat?" Snaketooth was confused and asked.

"To celebrate the completion of the Kingdom Main Street, a new drama will be played in the square. I heard it's called 'The City of Love' and the Star of Western Region will be on the stage too. Oh my goodness... I can't wait to see it!"

"Go to see it with someone else. I'm tired and don't feel like going anywhere today," Snaketooth said in low spirits.

"Really? It's the premiere." Tigerclaw paused and then smiled meaningfully, adding, "All the locals know that the lord will take the witches to see the premiere of the Star Flower Troupe. Maybe you can see Paper there!"

# Chapter 572: The Song of Praise

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By the time when Snaketooth and Tigerclaw came to the square, a huge crowd of people had already gathered up there. Snaketooth had never seen so many people get together in one place, even when Longsong Stronghold was distributing relief grains.

He counted roughly and estimated that there were probably over 5,000 people came to watch the play.

The square which used to be just a flat land was changed into a giant, sunken bowl in the ground, which was called an amphitheater. According to the locals, this was the third time that the square was rebuilt. Generally speaking, such a huge project would take one or two years to complete, but this amphitheater had been built in merely half a month and during the time, nobody had ever seen where the soil dug out went.

In this amphitheater, the audience could sit on the stone steps to watch the play, instead of standing until their legs were numb. It also enabled the audience to have a better view, as long as you could find a seat. As for those who came late, they could still stand on their tiptoes around the square to have a look.

Tigerclaw squeezed into the last row of the stone stairs and made a space enough for two people, saying, "Not so bad. We still make it."

Snaketooth clutched a cloth bag to his chest and sat beside his friend with great care. As the bag contained all his savings in the past two months, he had to be alert in such a crowded place. In the Longsong Area, at places like this one, Rats would be on the spree. Though the Border Area had no Rats now, he still felt that he needed to watch out for the Rats who were "temporarily transferred to civilian work".

When the last afterglow of the sunset melted into the darkness of the night, there were only several burning torches giving light to the square. The stage was still enveloped in darkness. Snaketooth could not help but feel quite strange when he found that nobody came to light up the bonfire and that there was no firewood in the center of the square.

He could not help wondering how they were going to play without firelight.

Suddenly, a bright beam of light shone on the stage. It was dazzling but Snaketooth soon got used to this pure light. Then the second and the third beam of light appeared, gradually lighting up the stage. Gasps of amazement that were produced by the audience reverberated over the square.

"They're the lights used in the plants!" he thought.

"Oh, my goodness! Nightless light! They bring nightless lights here!"

Rumor had it that it was a magic light that trapped the lightning

of the sky in an expensive crystal glass bulb. Snaketooth had only seen it several times when he passed by the industrial district.

"Nightless light? Come on, it's called electric light and consumes electricity. It's made by the machines created by the witches! His Majesty planned to have every household equipped with electric lights, but the witch who provided electricity was unable to support so many lights. That's why only the plants are using this kind of lights now." Someone nearby snorted and said.

"How do you know that?" Tigerclaw asked with interest.

That person shrugged and said, "You aren't official residents of City of Neverwinter, right? The City Hall has done propaganda about electricity to tell us how to use the electric lights safely. They're like fire. If you don't use them properly, it'll cause disaster."

"Not like thunder?"

"Uhm... almost the same. Don't bother so much. When you become subjects of His Majesty and finish the primary education, you'll understand."

"Is there any way that I can become a formal subject faster? What's the primary education?"

Snaketooth asked and wanted to ask more questions, but Tigerclaw suddenly grabbed him up when the crowd burst into



deafening cheers.

The Star Flower Troupe stepped on the stage.

"Ms. May! Ms. May!"

"Ms. Irene!"

"Mr. Gait!"

The crowd cried out the names of the troupe members and the atmosphere reached a crescendo.

Seeing that, Snaketooth was filled with admiration suddenly.

He wanted to become someone like them, the focus of people's eyes. He wanted the audience to cry out his name loudly... They were neither nobles nor sages. They were not out of reach.

After the cheers died down, the play began.

This was the first time for Snaketooth to watch a drama played by Star and Flower of the Western Region. He never thought that he would be interested in such an elegant event usually enjoyed by the nobles, but when the music started, he was absorbed into the story without noticing it.

The leading roles of the story were not the nobles.

Instead, they were just ordinary people like himself... a free citizen, a refugee and a Rat.

They had both dreams for their future and misfortunes in their own lives. They all fetched up simultaneously at the same city, Star City. They met and helped each other. They confided their thoughts to each other. They suffered from the pain of leaving their hometowns and the sense of loss in the new city. After that, they pulled themselves together and found their own ways.

Nothing could be heard except the lines of the actors and actresses on the square. All the audience held their breath, as they were deeply involved in the story played on the stage.

At last, the roles on the stage finally settled down in Star City and lived comfortably ever after. Strangers that had helped each other in the past became friends and lovers in the end. Snaketooth felt being touched when a moving music was played. He pretended to rub his eyes to hide his tears and meanwhile found out that Tigerclaw was all tears though he did not look sad.

He was not the only one moved that much. Everyone around was just like him, lost in that moving story. No one had risen to cheer until the end of the play.

Even if no one said it out, everyone knew it clearly that the "Star City" was City of Neverwinter.

Snaketooth was lost in thought, [Even a Rat could have such a story?]

Right at the moment, a foreign-looking girl from behind the background plate stepped on the stage.

Like someone in a delicate painting, she was tall and had waist-length long bluish-gray hair, wearing a white dress which glinted.

She started to sing.

Totally different from the music played before, her song was powerful, praising the great and glorious workers. She sang in a way different from all the other female singers. She was inspiring and encouraging. Hearing her song, Snaketooth felt that he could even see his own sweats in the distant residential buildings and that all the foreigners who devoted themselves into the construction of this city deserved to be remembered.

The impact and emotions brought by the play were finally released at this moment. The audience flipped out and applauded with their greatest strength. The song promptly made their emotions run even higher!

They were all His Majesty's subjects!

The glorious workers!

The builders of City of Neverwinter!

...

After the show, His Majesty left with the witches via a raised platform which was built for temporary use. Snaketooth opened his eyes widely but still failed to find Paper in the crowd. Surprisingly, he did not feel as disappointed as he expected, since the song still reverberated in his ears, filling his heart with hope.

He believed that they would meet again sooner or later.

Like those foreigners, they would meet again right in this city.

# Chapter 573: The Battle of Fallen Dragon Ridge

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BOOM!

When the fire blasted out of the 152 shipboard artillery, Iron Axe felt the steel ship he stood on wobble slightly.

A few seconds later, a cloud of smoke and dust exploded on the foreign city wall, and then the roar quieted down for a while. After all the smoke and dust dispersed, he looked through the telescope and found that there was a now big crack in the lower portion of the stone wall.

Different from King's City, Fallen Dragon Ridge seldom encountered attacks from external enemies, being located in the central south of the kingdom. Thus, its city wall was quite low, not even half as high as that of Longsong Stronghold. The narrow wall at the top allowed only one person to pass, and they could not set up large defense equipment like mangonels. Therefore, the Artillery Squad had expanded field artilleries to the open space 500 meters away from the wall.

To make sure that the several hundred soldiers of the Vanguard Battalion could enter the city efficiently, Iron Axe decided to make three openings in the city wall before action. Any enemies trying to fill in and defend the open spots would be bombarded mercilessly by the twelve pounds cannons. Now that the gate and the north wall had been chiseled through, he would make a final command to attack once they seized the last entrance.

[If only the witches could've come with the army,] Iron Axe thought rather regretfully. It was a waste to use these precious shells on the stones.

If Lady Nightingale were here, they would only need three packs of explosives to destroy the whole city wall. After all, their defense was much weaker than King City's.

He was amused to realize the change in his belief. Half a year ago, he had insisted that the army should complete His Majesty's task independently. However, after conquering King's City with the help of the Witch Union, it suddenly occurred to him that the perfect way to fight was to use witches as their eyes or commandos.

"Sir!" a soldier on the observatory shouted. "Attention to the gate! They seem to be gathering horses!"

Iron Axe looked at the ruined gate through his telescope. With limited vision, he could only vaguely see the dust behind the wall.

"Do I need to adjust the naval artillery and fire in that direction?" Van'er asked.

"Not necessary. It'll waste at least two or three more shells." He shook his head and said, "Since they're horses, I think their plan is to gather knights and try to open the blockade line of field artillery through assault. There is nothing to worry about. While for you..." Iron Axe turned back to see Countess Spear. "After this assault, I'm

afraid there will not be many knights left in your domain."

"They decided to stand on my brother's side. These people are no longer my knights." She answered quietly. "That's the price they have to pay for their betrayal."

"I see." Iron Axe paused for a moment and said, "Have you decided what to do with Redwyne Passi?"

Yesterday, he received a secret letter from the City Hall, which demanded all the noble except Spear's relatives to be escorted to City of Neverwinter. Anyone who resisted would be executed on the spot, and their domain would be blocked by the First Army. The officers from the City Hall would arrive and seize their properties.

Based on that letter, the nobles would probably be sentenced to the mines with heavy labor. Currently several mines in Stronghold Area lacked sufficient labor forces. There should be hundreds of people, including family members, cronies and servants. It appeared there would be more iron ores in City of Neverwinter this year.

As for the culprit, Redwyne Passi, the letter instructed that he should be handed over to the countess herself.

The hesitation on Spear's face showed that she had not made a decision yet.

Iron Axe sighed in silence. If he were her, he would chop off his head without hesitation. Nothing was more unforgivable than betrayal.

"They're coming!" the observer shouted suddenly.

Putting aside these trifles, he continued to look at the battlefield through the telescope.

As he had expected, a group of knights rushed out from the gate heading directly to the edge of the artillery field.

The sound of gunshots suddenly echoed in the wilderness and forest. Puffs of smoke floated in the air in front of the battlefield. More than 20 knights and their squires fell down to the muddy ground in succession after rushing out less than 100 meters.

If Duke Ryan had led his troops to attack Border Town, the knightage might have still been able to cause a small threat to the First Army by acting in unison. However, now these iron turtles were almost living targets with no ability to strike back.

Revolving rifles and two HMGs (heavy machine gun) alone could firmly block the enemies on their way to attack. The field artillery did not even need to reload with grapeshots.

After another round of shots from the naval artillery, the thin wall finally collapsed. Iron Axe commanded to blow the whistle and attack immediately.



Soldiers in the Vanguard Battalion poured out from the alignment and separated into three groups targeting to the three openings.

The battle for recovering Fallen Dragon Ridge had officially been launched.

...

Two hours later, the First Army took the castles and churches.

The enemies had been too frightened of the booming weapons for any resistance. The last batch of knights who were destroyed immediately when they left the gate were all the soldiers Redwyne could gather.

The church people did not show up at all, and all the goods and materials were cleared. Priest Rosad was also missing.

There was no secret tunnel or hidden side door in Fallen Dragon Ridge and there was no way to escape in a city of this kind, which was backed up by the mountains. Soldiers searched for the usurper and blocked him at the top level of the castle.

Iron Axe commanded to take away the ministers who were on their knees begging for mercy and ordered the soldiers to leave Countess Spear and her brother alone in the chamber. Of course, Redwyne was tied to the chair tightly, so he could not do any harm

to the countess.

"I don't understand..." Spear said after a long silence. "What can you gain by being the lord? Our little brother and you know nothing about administration or trading. Even if you sit in this position, you just hand over your power to other feudatories. You think I'm less important to you than those strangers, don't you?"

"You're a witch, a demon's underling!" Redwyne craned his neck, crying. "Father was wrong about you. You cheated him!"

"But I'm still your sister!"

"You aren't!" He gritted his teeth and said, "You're just the bastard adopted by father!"

"Wh-what?" Spear was stunned.

"I heard with my own ears when he was drunk. You were the mistake he made when he was young. And you aren't a Passi!" Redwyne shouted with anger. "Why is it that you should inherit the family instead of me? I'm just taking back what was supposed to belong to me. You're the real stranger!"

Spear covered her head but she could not remember anything about her childhood. "The mistake he made?"

"If not, why do you look so different from mother? Can't you remember how you came to Fallen Dragon Ridge?"

"So... you are not my brother either."

"Exactly, I'm the true heir of my family, the Earl of Fallen Dragon Ridge! Release me immediately. I demand to be treated as a nobleman!"

Spear stumbled out the chamber. Iron Axe held her promptly and said, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." She took a deep breath. "Send my, no, send Redwyne Passi to City of Neverwinter. He has lost his mind. The mine is where he should be."

"As your wish." Iron Axe answered and nodded with agreement.

# Chapter 574: The Expansion of Education

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Summer began with a heavy rain.

Raindrops spattered on the windows, making the outside scenery a blur. One could only distinguish between the town and the remote mountains through the silhouette of the colors.

Standing in front of the French window and looking at the blurry sceneries in the rain, Roland still felt the singing of "The City of Love" reverberating in his ears.

He did not expect that, combined with Echo's ability, the first drama show performed three days ago could have such a striking effect.

The whole room had fallen into silence when the show finished. The audience had been so touched that their eyes had been filled with tears. Roland thought this scene could only be seen in the high-end opera house of the era where he came from. Even the audiences in the commercial cinemas aimed at the masses of his era could seldom be moved that much, let alone the ordinary people who lived in this backward era.

Even Roland himself who had seen all the scenes that made people shed tears, could feel the shudder deep down in his heart.

That was the strength of the "Resonance Song".

Roland recognized the importance of the inspirational singing during an enduring war in which the machines would not tire, but people would. Even if the guns and ammunition could be unceasingly transported to the battlefield, people would still be struck down by the endless pressure of survival, especially when the tide of battle was unfavorable and the army suffered heavy casualties. This kind of emotion was easily magnified, causing the soldiers to lose their faith in the ultimate victory.

Throughout history, people had thought many methods to boost the morale of the army. This first type of method included making sure the soldiers could eat as much hot food as possible or air dropping ice cream. The second type was assigning a commissar or an army chaplain to go with the army. But these methods were impractical for Roland. The former required a very good logistical supply ability and the latter was hard, in such a short period of time, to cultivate a group of core members who had strong faith that were also good at encouraging people.

Echo's ability let him see a shortcut to boosting morale.

It might sound a little absurd, but it was more reliable compared with other methods.

While he was thinking, he heard a knock on the office's door and then Barov walked in.

"Your Majesty, the recent house purchase statistics are available now."

"What's the result?"

"Just as you expected." He excitedly unfolded a list on the mahogany table. "Since the first night of the new drama, people who come to the City Hall to apply for house renting and purchasing has significantly increased, even the people who apply for marriage registration has increased a lot too."

"Really?" Roland went back to the table to look at Barov's statistics. "The City of Love" was not just meaningless entertainment. Apart from advocating that labor was glorious and construction was great, it also transmitted another opinion which linked marriage with a stable residence. Instead of letting the outsiders develop a sense of belonging slowly and making the locals accept those foreigners step by step through daily contact, it was better if he set a simple standard himself to advance the fusion of the refugees.

That standard was housing.

"You're one of us if you have a house in our place." This saying might seem a bit rude, but it saved a lot of time in this special period.

To gain people's recognition and build up their own families, the foreigners had to have a house. And once they owned real estate here, they would defend everything in this place voluntarily. Of course, these ideas were unsuitable to speak out directly, but they would be naturally born in mind by the audience seeing the drama stories.

It was just like diamonds.

The classics advertising verbal's "A diamond lasts forever" made it the king of jewelry, and everyone would want one when they got married, making people completely forget its true nature which was not rare or precious.

Compared with diamonds, housing at least was far more practical.

However, in order to realize his goals, he could not set a too high standard, making people feel it was impossible to reach. In his city, now people could apply for renting a house with one gold royal and after that, they only needed to pay one gold royal as rent every year. When the rent they paid equaled to the house price, the house would belong to the renter spontaneously.

The target was not easy to achieve, as even the cheapest single room would cost 20 gold royals. That meant all the workers, for example, the temporary workers and handymen, would take 20 years to afford such a house which was less than 15 square meters and could only contain one bed, one table and one bathroom. People would call him a black-hearted realtor in the era where Roland came from.

All in all, according to Barov's statistics, "The City of Love" was undoubtedly successful in promoting his idea.

Most of the renting applications came from the several batches

refugees and serfs who arrived in the Border Area first, and house purchase requests were mostly proposed by the craftsmen with higher salaries and the broken nobles who had carried properties with them. After they all settled down here, they would become part of the City of Neverwinter forever.

Based on this successful experience, Roland had already figured out the contents of a new drama whose theme was getting married and working hard to buy a big house.

"Well done." He rolled up the list and gave it to Barov. "Besides, the recent solicitation of the refugees should continue to expand its scope, the plentiful population is the base for the development of the City of Neverwinter and other tasks can be put aside for it."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Barov laughed till his mustache was curled up.

"By the way, go and get Scroll. I have something to tell her."

...

"Your Majesty, did you want to see me?" Scroll walked into the office in a black skirt and white blouse, looking very capable.

"I want to expand the education scope, which will cover the refugees who have just arrived at the City of Neverwinter." Roland poured a cup of tea for her. "If the education only aims at the official citizens, the refugees would have to wait at least one more



year to receive primary education."

"I'm afraid this is untenable now," Scroll said after several minutes consideration. "There're too many of them. The current teacher couldn't take care of them all and the classrooms are not enough either. If we do as you ask, the number of the education ministry's staff would need to be doubled or tripled."

"I have a method which can reduce the teachers' pressure." Roland paused for a while and continued, "Let them study by themselves."

"Self-study?"

"Yes, every week we give one public lecture which only teaches them the basic reading and writing, and let them use the booklets with pictures and pronunciations to do some exercises by themselves in the rest of the time. There are no achievement tests and no mandatory requirements, and they learn according to their own free will."

"This..." She ran her fingers through her hair which was soaked wet by the rain unconsciously. "It's unlikely to have any effect. Your Majesty, without supervision, nine out of ten people won't learn well."

"It doesn't matter. I just want to offer them an opportunity," Roland laughed and said.

There was always someone who was unsatisfied with boring, low-paid jobs and was eager to achieve their goals quickly. In order to prevent these people from stepping aside, he must guide them to improve themselves in the right way.

In the future, more and more jobs would have literacy requirements, and the salaries for these jobs would be much higher than the handymen's. Given that, for those who wanted to buy a house and get rid of their poor and exhausting lives, it would be a better choice for them to learn how to read and write by themselves.

Through this method, those hardworking people could participate in the city's construction quickly.

To keep the new regime's vitality, the most important thing was never, ever blocking the way of promotion from the bottom layer.

That was what Roland believed.

# Chapter 575: Wendy's Expectation

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Wendy woke up and found that after a whole night, the rain had finally stopped.

She yawned and got out of the bed. The moment she pushed open the window, the sweet fragrance of wet soil swarmed into the room. After the rainfall, the garden was a bright shade of green and she could see droplets of water falling from the olive leaves near the window. The morning's gentle sunshine shone on the wet grass reflecting gleams of light.

A new day had begun.

After putting on her undergarments and coat, she went back to the bedside and patted Nightingale's cheeks, saying, "Time to get up."

Nightingale gave an obscure snort, and buried her face in the pillow.

Only in times like this, would she expose herself defenselessly, instead of hiding in the Mist. Wendy smiled and shook her head. "Then I'll go eat breakfast first."

Nightingale's ears moved slightly, like unconscious trembles, but Wendy knew she had heard.

She gently closed the door and went to the bathroom to wash up

before she walked toward the hall to enjoy breakfast.

The chefs always woke up extremely early since they had to prepare food for everyone before daybreak. The firewood in the oven could burn for a long time, so there was no need to worry about the food getting cold half way. If she wanted to eat something, she could just grab a bowl and spoon and fetch it in the kitchen. His Majesty said it was called buffet and it seemed to be a very common dining style for him, but for her, this kind of life could be called extravagant.

In the Witch Cooperation Association, Wendy had never thought that one day she could eat as much as she wanted. Back then they were lucky to have sufficient food to eat, let alone to pay any attention to the taste, as the food was never enough.

But now, there were three or four dishes just for breakfast every day, such as porridge, toast, dried fish and fried eggs.

Even though she had been living in the castle for nearly a year, she still felt extreme satisfaction and happiness every time she ate.

Meanwhile, she was very grateful to the person who had brought all these things to the witches and let her sisters live a free life.

When Wendy picked up her bowl in the dining room, there was no one in the hall, just several used plates on the long table. Obviously, she was not the first to eat. The Witch Union had never set a time to wake up, so everyone came to enjoy breakfast one after another. Lightning and Maggie were always the first to leave

the castle, followed by another group including Anna, Agatha, Lucia and others. She was usually between the two.

Nightingale was always the last.

This was because His Majesty loved to sleep late. When there was nothing urgent, he would get up at noon to deal with the government affairs. Nightingale was influenced by him.

She had once been the most discrete and acute person in the Witch Cooperation Association, alerted by even a small movement.

However, Wendy did not think this was a bad thing.

...

After breakfast, she went to the first floor of the Witch Building. This place had been transformed into the Witch Union's office.

Ring walked toward her as soon as she entered. "Sister Wendy, you're here!"

"Hello, Lady Wendy."

"Good morning ladies."

Another two young women from the City Hall bowed to her.

They had graduated from the institute which was originally founded by Karl Van Bate. They barely counted as Anna's and Nana's classmates and had no prejudice towards witches. The older one was Pearl and the younger one was Grayrabbit. Together with Lucia's little sister Ring, they formed the first clerks of the Witch Union's.

Of course, since Ring was under 14, she was just a fill-in for now.

Anyway, the jobs here were very easy, and she could consider it as extra education.

With the clerks' help, the Witch Union was finally getting on track.

"Good morning." Wendy nodded, sitting by the desk. "How are the sales of the first volume of 'The Witch Diaries'?"

"Very popular," Pearl smiled and said, "and people love the story of Border Town's little angel, especially the soldiers from the First Army. They come to buy it almost every day. This week we almost sold more than 60 copies a day. At this rate, we may sell out the 1,000 copies we originally printed within half a month."

Hearing that, Wendy was a little surprised. After all, as a book which was purely for entertainment, "The Witch Diaries" could not feed people or help them with their studies, but yet it could sell this well at such a high price. It was incredible.

The idea was originally put forward by His Majesty.

As a drama trilogy with an intricate plot and moving stories, "The Witch Diaries" had been praised by the City of Neverwinter's subjects. So, His Majesty decided to follow the pattern of the drama and illustrate the witches' life stories in the form of pictures to sell it in the Convenience Market's boutique. But unlike the drama, this time all the major characters in the stories were witches from the Union, and apart from the exquisite pictures, it also had some designed dialogues, making the readers feel as if they were watching a real drama play on the paper.

The main character of the first volume was Miss Nana Pine.

The 15-year-old girl had already been very famous in Border Town, with the ability to heal the pain of others and her natural affinity. No one could hate such an angel. Coupled with His Majesty's strong supportive attitude towards witches, as well as the first army's spread of her stories, she was even more popular than Anna.

After Wendy decided the plot of the stories, Soraya painted them one by one and stapled the book together. It sold for five silver royals per book. It was the refugees who needed to know about the witches most, but many refugees could not read and they were not interested in buying an exquisite album with half a month's salary. So, in the beginning, the potential buyers were locals and businessmen who came here to do business.

The former could spread the stories through the contact with foreigners and the latter could bring them to every city in the

kingdom.

After seeing how popular "The Witch Diaries" was, Wendy felt inspired.

She could hardly wait to get the pen and paper, and was starting to think about the contents of the next volume.

"Have you considered the content of the next stories?" Ring asked curiously.

"Yes, His Majesty said Echo will be the major character of the next volume," Wendy smiled and said, "and what do you think of this title 'The Silver Moon Princess from the Southernmost Region, the Land of Swirling Sand and Volcanoes'?"

"Wow! It's awesome!" The little girl exclaimed smacking her lips.

"When His Majesty recaptures the Southern Territory, you can go to the princess's hometown to see the vast desert."

"Wonderful!"

It was her job, spreading stories about the witches and letting everyone know who they really were.

"The Witch Diaries" was just a part of it.



Echo had already gotten acquainted with the Star Flower Troupe, and all the actors were full of praises for her immersive music.

Evelyn had opened a tavern next to the Holy Mountain Hotel, mainly offering mixed liquor with a unique flavor.

Hummingbird also joined the City Hall and became the deputy minister of the Ministry of Construction, and she was also the second witch officer in the City Hall next to Scroll.

The witches all worked very hard to build the City of Neverwinter. At the same time, they also made people accept their existence and equally treat them.

Wendy felt that the day which His Majesty had promised was just within their reach.

# Chapter 576: Deep Inside the Palace

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Otto Luoxi and Oro Tokat lurked behind a rockery, in the palace garden, in the City of Glow, the Kingdom of Dawn

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Of course, they were not completely sneaking. At least when entering the palace, they had passed through the door, right under the guards' noses. No guard would stop them from visiting any place in the palace, except for the forbidden areas, because all the guards knew that the Luoxis and the Tokats had always been loyal supporters of the royal family, and that these two young men would become the ministers of the eldest prince when they took over their respective families.

"Hey, are you sure about this?" Otto could not help but feel nervous.

If the Dawn castle where the King of Dawn spent time was a forbidden zone, his bedroom was even more forbidden. However, they happened to know a secret way from the garden to his bedroom. This narrow underground channel which they had explored with Andrea and Prince Appen in their childhood was meant to be one of the escape routes from the palace. They had considered it their own secret base and held small parties there occasionally.

Given that they were only 10 years old at that time, the worst punishment, even if they were found by His Majesty Moya, would

have been being blamed. Now as grown-ups, if they entered the palace without permission, what would His Majesty think?

"Come on! Gathering the three families to find out the reason why Appen has been acting strange, isn't that the plan?" Oro twitched his lips. "And now, at this crucial time, you want to flinch?"

"I ..." Otto opened his mouth but he was speechless.

"But how stupid you are! To get messages from Quinn, you told him Andrea's recent situation. If you weren't Andrea's childhood sweetheart, the old man would have killed you," Oro said while looking around, "and now is the best time to tell the truth, will you do it or not?"

After a moment's hesitation, Otto gritted his teeth and nodded.

What Earl Quinn had told them was astonishing.

Since His Majesty had fallen ill, the prince often met with an alchemist in the palace, casting his visitors out. It was said that a special drug from the alchemy could resist disease and enabled His Majesty to remain awake for one or two hours a day. As the prime minister, Andrea's father naturally had access to the palace to obtain political suggestions from His Majesty. The old man had gotten a glimpse of the alchemist and to his great surprise, he saw that it was actually a young woman, covered with a black veil, only her bleak silver-gray eyes showing.

At this description, Otto immediately thought of the church.

If it were not for his recent trip to the Kingdom of Graycastle, he would not think this way. After meeting with Roland Wimbledon, the messages about the church secretly training pure witches, attempting to subvert the four kingdoms and accumulating its power to resist the Battle of Doomsday had rooted in his mind.

He did not tell what he knew from Roland to Earl Quinn. After all, the impact of the news was so huge that he must confirm his conjecture before deciding the next step.

Hearing from the Earl that the alchemist would appear today, Otto immediately thought of the secret channel from his childhood.

Now that it was impossible to get the support of the eldest prince, this was his only way to discover the truth.

With this thought, he nodded to Oro who immediately poked the knee-high weeds, using a dagger to pry a cover disguised as a stone from behind the rockery. Rusty steel bars appeared in front of them. The fence, which could only be opened from the inside, was about an arm-length in width, but this was not a problem for the two who were fully prepared.

Oro took a glass bottle from his pocket, opened the lid and poured the tawny liquid onto the lock catch.

A puff of pungent white smoke rose up and the steel bars gave off a sizzling sound, like butter being thrown into a hot pot.

The liquid was the iron-melting water created by a master alchemist of the City of Glow, and a fist-sized bottle cost more than 10 gold royals. Oro was told that iron would become molten in the blink of an eye when using it. But this was not the case. The lock catch first shrunk in half and did not fall off the fence until he had used up the second bottle.

The two men bent over to enter the hole, and Oro did not forget to turn around and close the slates.

After they had crawled more than 10 steps, the channel became slightly spacious, and they could walk. Otto skillfully fumbled for the oil lamp hung on the wall, flaming it with flint. The faint light illuminated the cliffs and the arched ceiling. This place was still the same even after more than 10 years as if time stood still here. When passing by the lounge halfway, they could still see the soft seats and wine glasses they had dragged here for parties.

The road began to shift upwards and Otto Luoxi knew that they had entered the Dawn castle.

Castle walls were divided into two layers, just like a sandwich. The middle part between the two layers was reserved for secret chambers and tunnels. Finally, the two arrived at the end of the secret channel which was the very back of the fireplace in the bedroom of the king.

As the mechanism needed to be opened from inside, they could not walk directly into the bedroom. But they could roughly see the scene in the bedroom through the small gap in the trap door. The voices of conversation in the room could be heard if it was quiet enough.

Otto blew out the oil lamp and peeked through the gap.

The King of Dawn, His Majesty Deegan Moya, was lying in bed facing the fireplace. And Appen, the eldest prince, was pacing by the bedside, looking worried.

They looked at each other, then tacitly nodded and carefully leaned against the door. It was obvious that His Highness was waiting for the alchemist.

About an hour later, there was a sound in the room.

They immediately turned their heads, squinting.

Two women walked into the bedroom. One was the black-veiled alchemist that Earl Quinn had mentioned, and the other was probably the alchemist's assistant. She carried a satchel, wore a red and white cope and cloak, and had beautiful golden curly hair.

"You're late!" Appen said, displeased.

"Sorry," the blonde bowed and answered, "we were delayed by an unexpected situation on the way."

"There's no need to explain. All we need to do is to wake his father up. It doesn't matter whether we arrive early or late." The woman in the black veil said this with an icy voice.

"You shouldn't say that! We still need the help of His Highness." The blonde took out a green porcelain bottle from her satchel. "It's good for both of us to maintain a harmonious relationship, isn't it?"

"Give me the medicine." Appen took two steps toward them, but was stopped by the woman dressed in black veil.

"Did you forget our agreement? This medicine is only effective if fed by me, and in exchange, you must meet the requirements of His Holiness."

His Holiness!?

Otto was shocked. This honorific could only be used to name the Pope. He wondered whether they were really sent by the church.

He could not help but bite his lip. Apparently, they were not alchemists, but Pure Witches instead.

# Chapter 577: The Silent Massacre

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"I remember a month ago I told you to close the way to Kingdom of Wolfheart as soon as possible. Why are there still so many refugees flocking in?" the black-veiled witch said wryly, "and your knights should have arrived at the border by now."

"You know clearly that there are a large number of refugees!" Appen clenched his fists and said, "If they were prohibited from crossing the border, most of them would die from starvation. There are no cities nearby, and no places to provide food. It'll take at least a week to go back to Wilderness Town if they retract their original steps, and they..."

"Does that have anything to do with you?" The black-veiled witch interrupted impatiently. "If they suffer from starvation or thirst, they have only themselves to blame, after all, they've abandoned their kingdom. And you'd better pay attention to your father. Or do you want to breach the deal?"

"They abandoned their Kingdom? Ridiculous!" Otto thought, with a burst of anger. "It's the person like the black-veiled witch who has waged the war, displacing these people."

When it came to a breach of the deal, Appen showed obvious hesitation. After a while he said, "The rest of the road will be closed in a week, I hope you're satisfied with such a result. However, if they cross the border through the wildlands or the mountain ridges instead of walking through the official road, it's none of my business."



"Of course. I won't ram an impossible mission down your throat." The black-veiled girl took the porcelain bottle and sipped. She walked up to the bed and bent down to feed the elixir to the King of Dawn with her mouth. Otto and Oro, who were hiding in the path behind the fireplace, stared at her but saw nothing. After a while, she lifted her head and said, "The King of Dawn will recover as usual in an hour."

"Does the elixir have to be fed from your mouth?"

"Yes, it'll only work if fed by my mouth." She shrugged and said, "As long as you comply with the agreement, you can feel relieved knowing that the King of Dawn will recover totally, even much healthier than before."

"The next time we come back the border is to be completely closed." The blonde-haired woman smiled. "Do not let His Holiness down, Your Highness."

Just as they turned to leave, Appen suddenly asked, "You're witches, aren't you?"

"Ehn?" The two witches stopped abruptly.

"Is it because of the magic power of a witch that the elixir can only be fed by you?" he said slowly, "and no other reason could explain this. Although the existence of witches within the church is incredible, all you have done is nothing different from the demons."

"Are you sure you want to say this?"

"Come out!" The prince shouted.

The prince's words gave Otto and Oro a scare, but what they saw were several royal guards with light armor appearing from the closet and under the bed. The Pure Witches were hemmed in by a flock of guards.

"Oh," the blonde witch gave a whistle and said, "what an admirably, reckless move."

"And it makes no sense." The Black-veiled witch shook her head. "It appears that the church doesn't leave you with a great impression."

"Do not bluff!" Appen roared. "Your God's Punishment Warriors are indeed a miracle and are unimaginably strong. However, they're not here! We have God's Stone in the Palace, as many as we want. Do you think you'll have any chance to flee away?"

"Wait." The blonde witch smacked her lips and asked, "Are the witches we have encountered along the way your arrangement?"

"Those aren't real witches, they're tricks the Rats often used." Appen suddenly snapped as if the long-repressed rage was finally coming unleashed. "A handful of Magic Fire Stones should give us a clear picture of your strength. Are there any differences between the witches and the common people without the protection of

God's Punishment Warriors? It's not too late to beg for mercy if you hand over the elixir. Just do as I've said. Otherwise, we'll break your arms and legs, and pull out your teeth. You'll become humanoid pots to hold elixir."

"The others will be very angry if they hear your words." She sighed. "Young bloke, you should neither doubt the existence of witches nor laugh at their power. You'd better not let her see you next time, or you may have a very rough time."

"What?!" The Pure Witches' deprecating attitude just infuriated the prince further. "Hope you can stay so stubborn in the prison! Guards, take them down."

Otto stuck his face tightly to the flagstone in the hope of seeing more, but his body was soon stiff. He was too surprised to believe his eyes.

Before the guards could touch the Pure Witch, they changed the direction of the blades and committed suicide.

In a flash, blood bubbled and spurted out everywhere. The guards fell to the ground, silently. The smell of blood pervaded the room immediately.

However, Appen trembled ceaselessly as if he had seen something extremely horrible. The previous confidence and rage dissipated instantly. Urine trickled down his legs as he pissed his pants in fear.

"Let him go." the blonde witch shrugged and said, "He's still useful for us."

"Just a little lesson," the Black-veiled witch said and snapped her fingers. The elder prince sat down on the ground like awakening from a dream. He rocked back and forth trembling.

"Don't worry, you're still alive." She satirized. "But I can't guarantee you'll be so lucky next time."

"Why? How? Here, we ha-have God's Stone of Retaliation," Appen said stutteringly. "How could the witches..."

"Because we're Pure Witches," The blonde witch said with a hint of a smile on her face. "Why don't you comply with the agreement? Your father will be safe, and the existence of Kingdom of Dawn will be extended. You can remain a member when the church defeats Kingdom of Graycastle. Even though your kingdom will be under the governing of the church, you can still live a well-to-do life, and your subjects can be free from the war. Are there any benefits to doing these silly things?"

"And, don't forget to clean up the spot. Your father will wake up soon. Presumably, you don't want him to face such a bloody scene when he wakes up," she added as she left.

Otto felt his back soaked with cold sweat. He chilled at the thought of the Pure Witches who had no fear of the God's Stone, and the church's plan to capture Kingdom of Graycastle and to take over Kingdom of Dawn. As His Majesty Roland said, the church

had taken the Four Kingdoms as a safe bet.

...

Appen was the only one left in the room when the King of Dawn woke up. The blood-soaked carpet was covered with cloth.

He fed his father oatmeal spoon by spoon. He seemed to forget his illness, chatting desultorily about government and family affairs with Appen. It appeared as if there were no changes.

Otto dared not catch his breath at the sight of this quirky scene.

Oro and Otto did not leave the hidden path until dusk fell.

"What should we do?" Oro, who had always been unflappable, questioned, panic leaking into his voice.

"Tell all these things to Earl Quinn... and our parents." He gritted his teeth. "The problem is beyond our capability."

"But you've seen the Pure Witch resist God's Stone. What difference does it make if our families and Earl Quinn know the truth?"

"I know someone who can deal with them." Otto looked at his friend and said slowly, "We can ask for the help. Have a messenger of Kingdom of Graycastle send the news to His Majesty Roland

Wimbledon!"

# Chapter 578: A Life-or-death Report

---

Yorko's life had been very comfortable of late.

With the King of Dawn still to recuperate, Prince Roland seemed to have forgotten about him as well. It was only the nobles who did not ignore this ambassador from a neighboring country.

He attended extravagant banquets and indulged in various pleasures with Denise, who even introduced him to exclusive clubs and brothels. The abundance and unique flavors of the capital were things he would never be able to enjoy in Graycastle.

His current life was only made possible because of his title as "Wimbledon's royal ambassador".

Although his rank was equivalent to an earl, yet in certain ways, he possessed more advantages than an earl. The latter could only do as he pleased within his own fief, while the former could enjoy the privileges of an upper noble in the other kingdoms as well.

This clearly showed him the benefits that status accorded.

The bodyguard assigned him to by His Majesty, named Hill Fawkes, was also a peculiar person.

Whenever Yorko made contact with a new person, Hill would sneak into that person's bedroom within the following three nights and later inform Yorko about that person's identity, status and

interests. If the person was a big shot, nearly everything about his life (including his hobbies) could be found out. With Hill's assistance, Yorko was able to mingle within the noble community even more smoothly.

Furthermore, Hill's arrangements allowed him to make considerable progress on his plan to purchase slaves.

Once, after a great night in bed with Denise, he mentioned this plan to her and she immediately agreed to his idea—the existing caravan would be used to establish a slave trading route, through which he would purchase the refugees required by His Majesty from the other slave traffickers, and transport them to Graycastle where they would be resold. The condition was that the slaves had to each be given an identity as a free citizen, and not be treated merely as goods for resale.

Of course, merchants were merchants after all; even at a time of pleasure, they did not forget to negotiate the price. While Denise would not charge a commission, Yorko would have to cover all of the transportation expenses. After factoring in the manpower costs, meal costs, vehicle fees and other expenses, he calculated that the selling price of each slave had to be set at 10 silver royals in order for the business to reach his desired profit.

When Hill entrusted him with this task, he assuredly accepted and proclaimed that he would not let any more talented people end up as slaves. His attitude undoubtedly deepened Denise's attraction to him. After concluding the brief negotiation, the two of them returned to the bed for another passionate romp.



In the following days, Yorko sent Hill to negotiate with the other parties involved so that he did not have to take care of these trivial business matters himself.

Soon, when he heard that the first batch of slaves, comprising of 25 people, had been purchased the previous day, he realized that it made him eligible for the 125 silver royals which His Majesty had promised as a reward.

Is there another job where I can make money just by lying in bed?

Being an ambassador is simply awesome!

Just as Yorko was deliberating over where to go for fun today, a servant knocked on the door and walked into the room. "Your Excellency, the eldest son of the Luoxi Family, Lord Otto, wishes to meet you."

"Otto Luoxi?" Yorko was familiar with this name. He knew that Luoxi was one of the three powerful families of King's City of Kingdom of Dawn, and was only second in power to the Moya royal family. Denise had even warned him that he was free to court any woman except those of these three families, especially the Quinn family. His status as an ambassador would be insufficient to protect him in that case.

Yorko did not have to worry that this was the reason as he had paid great caution in all of his love affairs. "Perhaps, he has come to invite me to another banquet?"

"Bring him in."

A young man entered the study. He first took a good look around the place, and then closed the windows in the room on his own initiative before he sat down on the chair intended for him.

His expression looked somewhat anxious. The dark circles under his eyes revealed that he had stayed up late and not slept much the previous night.

Yoriko was against the idea of emptying one's vitality for the sake of enjoyment. In his opinion, the abstemious sexual pleasure was beneficial as it made both partners happy and healthy. In contrast, depleting all of one's energy in bed would harm one's physical potential in the long term. Prince Appen was a clear example of this. His face had turned completely pale, and if he did not change his ways, he would be incapable of seeking pleasure by the time he turned 30.

The young man did not say anything for a long time. This surprised Yoriko. It felt discourteous, especially coming from one of the three families. He waited for a while before he decided to break the silence. "Greetings. You should be Lord Otto Luoxi. What brings..."

"You're able to contact His Majesty Roland Wimbledon, right?" The young man suddenly snapped. "I have an important report for him."

"Eh..." Yorko was puzzled. "What report?"

"It's all written in here." Otto took out a letter, placed it in front of Yorko, and added ten gold royals on top of it. "And this money is for reward. Please make sure that this letter reaches your king. The information concerns the survival of Kingdom of Graycastle!"

Yorko inhaled a mouthful of cold air. "The survival of Kingdom of Graycastle? This has to be an exaggeration." Otto continued to stare at him with gleaming eyes until he collected his wits and replied, "I understand. Don't worry, I'll do as you say and deliver this to His Majesty."

"Make sure it's done as soon as possible." After exhorting Yorko repeatedly, Otto got up and departed. His anxious demeanor clearly suggested that he was not lying.

Yorko hastily kept the ten gold royals in his pocket. Instead, he left the letter untouched. He was aware that it had to be handled with great caution and thus it was best to ask Hill for advice first.

...

At night, when Hill Fawkes entered his bedroom, Yorko went through what happened during the day.

After listening to Yorko's account, Hill pondered for a while before he pulled out a small knife and cleanly opened the letter.

"What're you doing!" Yorko exclaimed in shock. "Opening a letter intended for His Majesty is a grave offense!"

"Shh." Hill made a gesture to keep quiet. "If the information is truly as important as he claims, it would be wrong for us to use conventional means to deliver this letter. A messenger from City of Dawn to Western Region will take at least a month, while bad situations may occur on the road. It'd be too risky."

"What has that got to do with opening the letter?"

"Do you remember the gray falcons I've been keeping? They're the fastest couriers of all. They can reach City of Dawn within two to three days." Hill explained. "At City of Dawn, they'll pass the letter to another group of falcons, and within a week, His Majesty will be able to receive it. However, they're unable to carry such a large envelope. After I've read the contents, I'll rewrite the letter as a secret letter."

"Gray falcons are able to send letters like carrier pigeons?" Yorko was astonished. "I'd thought you raised them for hunting."

"They're much smarter than pigeons." Hill remarked. He then opened the letter and soon his expression turned grim. "Who would think something like this could happen..."

"What's written in it?"

"Do you really want to know?" Hill turned his head.

"Never mind." Yorko coughed twice. "I'd rather be able to sleep well tonight."

"A wise choice." Hill approved. "Also, it's best you don't mention to anyone that Otto Luoxi came to find you. All banquets in the palace should be canceled or postponed for now." He paused briefly before revealing. "They're in deep trouble."

# Chapter 579: Two Incoming Letters

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Roland received a letter from Calvin Kant, Duke of the Northern Region.

It was accompanied by a fingerprinted memorandum that expressed the Northern Region's intent of loyalty to His Majesty.

The letter itself talked about more trivial matters.

First, it asked when Roland would stage his accession ceremony, so that the Duke could prepare his journey to attend. This was the convention every time a new king was soon to be coronated.

The next question asked about the new policies, such as how they should be enforced, what the remaining powers of the nobles were, how succession arrangements should be made and what the management scope of the city hall should be.

These questions were predictable. But it was the last question which surprised Roland.

At the end of the letter, the Duke proposed a connection through marriage. An entire page was dedicated to extolling the beauty and talent of his daughter, Edith. It also claimed that she would be able to handle all kinds of issues and affairs, whether they were domestic or foreign, and therefore, she was the most suitable candidate to be queen. Roland laughed heartily as he read through this section of the letter.

"What're you laughing about?" Nightingale's voice came from the direction of the deck chair.

"A very interesting... father." He raised the letter. "Have a look at this."

Nightingale came out of her Mist, took the letter from Roland, and read it. Then she frowned and asked, "You won't agree to it, will you?"

"Of course not," Roland replied lightheartedly. "I don't need marriage connections to preserve the stability of my throne. Furthermore, the letter makes her sound so able that I won't even dare to let her into the castle. Or else, it may become unclear who the king is."

"You do sound truthful." Nightingale remarked and visibly sighed in relief.

"Hey, don't you believe me?"

"It's not that I don't believe you, but you know that witches can't..." She paused for a moment before continuing. "After our awakenings, we can't be considered complete women anymore."

"I don't think that way." Roland shook his head in disagreement. To him, the social perception that infertility was a defect would be expunged as civilization gradually progressed. Conversely, the

beautiful appearances, attractive physiques and incredible abilities which magic power could bring about would become increasingly important and desirable over time. As long as Mankind lived on, witches would inevitably rise up as a group. Fortunately, they could be born in normal humans, and furthermore, there was no specific method to trigger an awakening. These thus allowed witches and normal humans to live and work together or perhaps even to marry.

Just as Roland was about to expound at length on his personal view of witches, a gray falcon flew into the room through an open window and perched on Roland's desk with a loud thump.

A loop of yellow cloth was tied around its claws—this meant that it was a secret letter which arrived from the old King's City.

Roland swallowed his words, took a piece of dried fish out of a drawer, and tossed it to the gray falcon which was already waiting for its reward. Then he unwound the cloth and took out the neatly-folded oilpaper from within.

As the size of the secret letter was limited, the contents written on it had to be extremely concise.

The first sentence of the letter was enough to give Roland a huge shock.

"The palace of Kingdom of Dawn has been infiltrated by the Pure Witch who can defy the God's Stone of Retaliation to use their abilities."



"Witches who're immune to the influence of the God's Stone?" As far as Roland knew, only two kinds of beings could do this. The first was Extraordinaries with their enhanced bodies, while the second was senior demons that were called Magic Slayer.

As Roland continued reading, he realized that each successive line of news got more and more shocking.

"When Prince Appen attempted to resist the Pure Witch, they manipulated his guards to slit their own throats."

"The church's aim is to establish firm control over the Kingdom of Dawn before it places full concentration on attacking the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Otto Luoxi and Oro Tokat witnessed everything that took place. The three families hope to receive your kind aid."

Roland suddenly realized that his plans to recapture Southernmost Region would have to be adjusted substantially.

Three days passed.

Roland convened a strategy discussion meeting in the castle's reception room.

The attendees included City Hall Director, Barov; Commander of

the First Army, Iron Axe; Chief Knight, Carter; Longsong Stronghold Consul, Petrov; Witch Union representatives, Wendy and Agatha; a representative of Sleeping Island's witches, Sylvie; and lastly, Pearl of the Northern Region, Edith.

"That's the current situation, basically speaking." Roland concluded after recounting the contents of the secret letter to the attendees. "Although we're unable to verify the information, if everything written in the letter is to be believed, the Kingdom of Graycastle shall unquestionably face its biggest challenge before the next Battle of Divine Will. After some consideration, I've decided that the Southernmost Region's battle arrangements have to be temporarily suspended." He glanced towards Iron Axe. "Will that be okay?"

As the chief commander of the spring offensive, Iron Axe had swiftly seized Willow Town and Fallen Dragon Ridge according to plan, and thus gave Roland control over the gateway towns that connected the City of Neverwinter and the Southern Territory. Iron Axe had intended to build on this success by completing the territorial expansion before autumn arrived. This would include bringing the Sand Nation under the domain of Roland's kingdom. The two people who would then be responsible for establishing good relations between the two races were Echo and Iron Axe. As both of them belonged to the Mojin Clan, they could serve as mediators in a racial conflict. Iron Axe had especially yearned to return to Iron Sand City to take revenge for being framed. Hence, allowing him to lead the troops to seize the Southernmost Region was the best reward that Roland could have given him. Now that the battle plans were suspended, it was understandable if he was disappointed.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe did not reveal any expression, and his reply was as sure as ever. "I suggest that we let the newly-trained soldiers take the place of the First Army soldiers stationed at Fallen Dragon Ridge. They'll have no problems dealing with the nobles there, while this would allow the First Army to gather its greatest strength to fight against the church."

"We'll do exactly that." Roland nodded approvingly before he stood up and walked in front of the large map. "Presently, we face two main problems. The first is that we don't know when the enemy will attack. The second is that we don't know where they'll attack from. The church used to have only one route to invade the Kingdom of Graycastle. This would be traveling directly south through Coldwind Ridge to reach King's City. However, now that the church controls the Kingdom of Dawn, it's possible that the Judgement Army will attack us through their border. Does anyone have a good idea how we can cope with this?"

"No matter where they appear from, they'll first have to go through the Northern Region." Barov was first to speak. "Coldwind Ridge, Deepvalley Town, City of Evernight and Palisade City, all of these are places administered by Duke Calvin. I suggest that we allow Miss Edith to go back and inform her father about this. We'll then keep a lookout for enemies in the Northern Region. This is the most secure way. But, Your Majesty..." The City Hall Director rubbed his hands together. "Do we truly stand a chance against the church?"

This foolish question was badly received by everyone present. Edith unceremoniously replied, "If His Majesty says that we don't have a chance, are you going to wag your tail at the church and beg for mercy?"

"What nonsense are you talking? As the City Hall Director, I have to make contingency plans for the worst that can happen..."

Edith ignored him and turned towards Roland. "Your Majesty, while it's indeed necessary to send people to monitor every road in the north, it won't be an effective method on its own. The response will be slow, and by the time enemies are discovered, it'll mean that they have already begun to act. This'll give you very little time to respond."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Of course." Edith replied confidently. "We should send people to Hermes."

"The church's holy city?" Carter frowned in disdain. "What use would that be? Do you think the Pope will inform you when he dispatches his army?"

"Also, the people living there are believers and zealots. It'll be difficult for spies to blend in." Petrov added.

"There's no need to enter the holy city." Edith laughed. "All we need to do is to have a nice chat with a nearby merchant."

# Chapter 580: The Tooth Extraction Campaign

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"Tell me more." Roland could not help becoming interested in Edith's idea.

"The terrain of Hermes is very unique. There's a slope around this area of the Impassable Mountain Range. The old part of the holy city is located at the lower end of the slope, while the new part is built on a plateau on the higher end. The environment there is very harsh. Although there're natural barriers that keep demonic beasts away, the highland isn't really suitable for living, let alone for cultivating and farming. Thus the food and supplies of the new holy city have to be provided by the old one, despite the fact that the latter's mass land can only produce enough supplies for the 20,000 or so people living downhill."

Edith walked to Roland's side, pointed at the map, and continued, "This means that they have to gather supplies from other places. For example, they would buy plots of land from churches and related organizations in nearby cities. Or they would rent wheat fields for farming. Every year during autumn, dozens of horse carriages would arrive from the four kingdoms every day to provide supplies to the new holy city. The old holy city has become something like a market town where these carriages may rest, as well as a checkpoint where the church can control the flow of people in and out of the new city."

"In other words, whenever they mobilize the Judgement Army, the merchants here would definitely witness it. In fact, even before the army acts, we can observe changes in the transportation of

supplies to deduce when they'll move out."

The young woman spoke as if she was taking part in a modern-day oratorical competition. Her eyes routinely swept across everyone present to make sure that they were paying attention to herself. The level of confidence she displayed was rarely seen in women of her era.

Roland silently thought to himself, "Perhaps what Calvin Kant wrote in the letter isn't all boastful bullsh\*t. Judging from Edith's manner, she is indeed worthy of being called 'Pearl of the Northern Region'."

"How do you know all of this so well?" Barov stroked his beard as he queried. "It's almost as if you came from there."

"I lived there for a period of time," Edith replied without a second thought, "because of the Agreement on the Months of Demons."

"What's that?" Roland asked doubtfully. He seemed to have an impression of what it was, but could not recall the exact details of it.

"How can you not know?" The young woman blinked in amazement. "To help the church tide over the disasters during the Months of Demons, the four kingdoms had to dispatch troops to aid Hermes and fight alongside the Judgement Army. Your older brother, Gerald Wimbleton, was the commander of Graycastle's border troops. I've fought under him before. However, there seem to be some mishaps over the past year. It's reported that the

coalition of the four kingdoms has suffered many casualties, while the church's Judgement Army has suffered a similar loss."

"This is indeed so." Petrov corroborated what Edith said. "My friend, Rene Medde, completed his knight test in Hermes."

"Does every knight have to fight against demonic beasts before he can be granted his title?" Roland looked towards Carter. "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"Ahem, this is a method that knights from small towns love to use." Carter shrugged his shoulders. "The knightage of King's City has its own rules for that. Apart from valiant combat, a knight's loyalty and knowledge are also very important considerations. These can't be proven simply by fighting against some evil creatures."

"By the way, Your Majesty." Edith did not refute Carter's words and instead turned to face Roland. "May I inspect how your army fights in combat? I've always been curious as to how you managed to capture King's City in just one day. If I can understand how the First Army operates, I may be able to contribute in future battles."

This was not a big problem. There were no issues of secrecy. With the weaponry that the First Army now possessed, it was impossible to emulate their methods just by observing. As technology advanced, wars were becoming more and more expensive. Without a complete logistics supply system and industrial production support system, a batch of flintlocks would be utterly useless on its own. Furthermore, by displaying his military strength to the loyalists of the Northern Region, he could

not only increase their confidence in him, but also deter them from having any secession ideas. As he thought about this, Roland nodded at Iron Axe and ordered, "Go and make arrangements for her."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty, I suggest that you issue a decree, in the name of the king, to every city and town in Graycastle to expel their churches." Barov was unwilling to be outdone by Edith. "Or else, when the war begins, the churches of these places will become strongholds from where they devour the whole kingdom."

"There aren't many lords who would happily do so. The church is typically a major source of tax revenue, and its power can be quite frightening. The lords prefer to follow the way that the wind blows." Edith shrugged her shoulders. "This is also how the nobles usually act."

"In any case, it's better than not doing anything at all." The director glared at the young woman angrily.

"Of course." She laughed dismissively. "The Northern Region will fully comply with this decree."

"Then we shall do that." Roland nodded in approval of Barov's idea.

"This could be a very difficult battle." Sylvie's facial expression



seemed rather anxious. "It's best that you inform Lady Tilly. The Sleeping Island witches may be able to assist you."

As Roland listened to Sylvie, he could not help laughing bitterly in his heart. Sleeping Island's problems amounted to no less than his. He had still not heard back from them after sending out the intelligence regarding the Bloodfang Association. If Tilly brought her subordinates to aid him while their internal issues were still not resolved, Sleeping Island might fall into big trouble. However, this did not mean that Sylvie's words were senseless. Witches were indeed the most effective way of dealing with the Pure Witch and their uncanny abilities. "I'll remember to write a letter to her," he replied.

"Don't forget to prepare God's Stones of Retaliation for your men." Agatha was next to chime in. "Throughout the Union's centuries of existence, there have been several witches with inconceivable levels of ability. Any normal person who didn't wear a God's Stone would have completely no resistance against them. One of these witches could easily take away the lives of thousands of people."

"Won't a flintlock or cannon work against them?"

"Let's not even mention a witch like Nightingale, who can move close to your army easily. Some abilities already take effect by the time you see the witch."

Roland was dumbstruck for a moment. The First Army, including its reserve forces, already comprised of 5,000 men. Where was he going to find so many God's Stones of Retaliation?

Even if he used witch blood to split the God's Stones into more pieces, he would not be able to produce a sufficient amount in such a short time.

"Your Majesty, you can try extorting these Stones from the churches." Iron Axe suggested. "If we only attack the church halls and believers, while not affecting the lives of civilians, even the nobles would not dare to oppose you openly. This way, we can fulfill Lord Barov's suggestion while also obtaining a large amount of God's Stones for free."

The corners of Barov's mouth arched into a grin. "Do you mean we should send out the First Army to plunder the churches?"

"We'll destroy the strongholds of the enemy, just like breaking off the fangs of a poisonous snake." The commander corrected Barov. "This will also allow Miss Edith to observe the First Army engage in a real fight. Compared to a rehearsal, this would be much more informative."

"I also think so." Edith laughed in agreement.

"This is indeed killing many birds with one stone." Roland thumped the table emphatically. "Let's call it the 'Tooth Extraction Campaign'."

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# Chapter 581: Late Night Talk

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Late at night, Wendy called all of the witches into her bedroom.

The usually spacious room was now packed.

It felt like deja vu. A year ago, Wendy had done the same thing. She had gathered all of the witches to inform them of the situation in Border Town and quell their uneasiness.

At that time, only seven of their sisters were able to escape from the Barbarian Lands. The witches were left traumatized, and were unsure and afraid of what was in store ahead. Many came to Border Town with a mentality that "We've suffered so much that whatever happens next is a blessing". To them, survival itself was a difficult game, not to mention dealing with the church which perpetually hung over their heads like a shadow.

This time, the looks and feelings of everyone in the room were completely different from a year ago.

At present, the witches' consideration was gradually shifting away from focusing on survival to maintaining their relatively carefree lives.

There were no more oppression and hostility from other people.

And no more worries about food and safety.

In essence, this place had become the witches' "Holy Mountain".

Furthermore, if they could help His Majesty Roland to defeat the church successfully, all of their nightmares would vanish and they would be truly liberated forever.

Wendy waited until everyone's eyes were fixed on her before she began. "The church is coming."

The daytime meeting did not offer much in the way of intelligence. Wendy quickly finished telling the witches about the contents of the secret letter, and the room fell into an awkward silence.

"Will His Majesty... win?" After some time, Mystery Moon asked almost inaudibly. "I'm willing to spend all of my time generating electricity for him at the factory area..."

"Oh come on, His Majesty would have to arrange someone to take care of you if so." Lily smirked. "It's best you don't give him more trouble at a time like this."

"What trouble!"

The witches in the room started to laugh. Now that the first person had spoken, more and more voices were heard in the room.

"I'll work even harder to produce white liquor." Evelyn resolved.

"But, would so much liquor be needed while we're at war with the church?"

"Aye... is that so?"

"I believe His Majesty won't lose. Didn't Carter also manage to severely injure Ashes, the Extraordinary Witch?" Hummingbird mooted. "And the God's Punishment Army isn't nearly as powerful as Ashes."

"Is that true? Even the invincible Ashes has lost before?" Softfeathers, who rarely spoke, looked surprised.

"I won't consider it a loss. Carter was battered to be unconscious while Ashes was completely incapacitated. It's more like a tie."

"As far as I know, it wasn't a fair fight." Agatha disputed. "Had the Extraordinary used equivalent weapons to Carter's, she would have been in a stronger position."

"But Sleeping Island only has one Extraordinary, while there're thousands of soldiers carrying guns."

"Hold it, sisters. Your debate's heading in the wrong direction." Scroll shook her head in disapproval. "We're talking about the church and His Majesty now."

Wendy quietly heaved a sigh of relief. Although everyone was anxious, nobody seemed afraid of fighting against the church. This would have been completely inconceivable a year ago, when the might of the church seemed to be as steady and unshakeable as a huge mountain. None of the witches who fought against them was able to survive. The Witch Cooperation Association had to hide in various places, and only managed to shake off the chasing enemies by advancing towards the secluded Impassable Mountain Range.

Of course, this mentality change was, for the most part, down to the fact that His Majesty had never lost a foreign war.

"All in all, this war will be crucial to the future of the Witch Union." Wendy inhaled a deep breath. "Has anyone thought about what will happen if His Majesty completely defeats the church?"

Everyone in the room turned silent, but a strange and indescribable twinkle gleamed in their eyes.

"The entire kingdom... and maybe even the entire continent, will become safe for witches to reside in. In His Majesty's territory, we'll be able to create a new world together with other people, one where everyone enjoys equal honor and status. This is also what His Majesty has mentioned several times. I just didn't think that it could all be possible so soon."

Wendy paused for a short while. "However, going by His Majesty's usual way of doing things, I urge everyone not to work too hard. Just do your jobs as usual. We'll not fail if we can keep this confidence."

She did not comprehend sophisticated ideas, nor was she among the Union's most able and brightest witches. Now that His Majesty had placed her in charge of the Union, she simply did what she could. Every time before an expedition, His Majesty would give an impassioned speech to the First Army. Wendy could never think of a way to inspire the witches in the same way as him. In the end, she always resorted to speaking what she felt at the bottom of her heart.

"The intention to be considerate of other people is more important than anything else." She firmly remembered these words of Scroll.

"This place is our home and will serve as the turning point for the fates of all witches. I'll give all of myself for it!"

Wendy stretched out her left hand, with the back of her hand facing upwards.

Scroll was the first to press her hand on top of Wendy's.

Then, Nightingale and Anna followed.

"For His Majesty and City of Neverwinter!"

All of the witches gathered together with their hands stacked on top of each other's. The witches of the Bloodfang Association had hesitated for a while, as though they were unsure whether they

would be accepted by everyone else, until Leaf pulled them into the circle. As per convention, they were only considered truly integrated into the group after they made hand contact with the other witches.

"I really don't wish to have to deal with this annoying bunch before fighting against the demons."

Although Agatha voiced her displeasure, she also stretched out her hand and joined in.

Lastly, Wendy placed her right hand on top of the stack and looked around at everyone.

"For the Witch Union!"

"For the... eternal Holy Mountain!"

...

After the witches departed, only Wendy and Nightingale were left in the room.

As Wendy was closing the door, she suddenly felt a breeze of cold wind behind her back.

She turned her head back, only to see that Nightingale had silently opened the window, and was now sitting on the sill and



looking into the night sky. The night breeze blew her hair upwards, while at the same time, a faint fragrance whiffed by.

"Are you also worried about this war?" Wendy walked over to the window and asked.

"Worried?" Nightingale turned her head to face Wendy. Under the glow of the Stone of Light, scorching rays gleamed in her pupils. "The only thing I'm worried about is that I'll laugh myself to death."

"L-laugh?"

It was only at this time that Wendy felt the piercing aura that emanated from the latter's body. Unlike most witches, Nightingale could release her magic powers even when she was not actively using her abilities. To her, these powers were no longer elusive and intangible things, but instead were like sharp blades which created inaccessible regions of space. It was as if her misty world was slowly eating into the space around itself and beginning to take hold of the physical world. Ever since she came to Border Town, this feeling was becoming more and more pronounced to the people around her.

To an enemy, this would be the greatest portent of danger.

"I've waited a long time to take proper revenge on the church," Nightingale slowly explained. "Our sisters who wrongly died at the church's hands must also be looking forward to this day. The taste of revenge, from my experience, is truly unforgettable."

It was hard to imagine that this was the same woman who lingered in bed and did not want to wake up in the morning. Fortunately, she wasn't an enemy of the sisters.

Wendy reached her hand out to Nightingale. Upon contact, the piercing aura disappeared. She proceeded to cuddle Nightingale in her arms.

"You can continue to do whatever you want. Just remember to take good care of His Majesty... and also yourself. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Nightingale closed her eyes and replied softly. "I will."

# Chapter 582: Military Strategy

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Once the war order was issued, Neverwinter immediately went into overdrive.

Bags of wheat plundered from Fallen Dragon Ridge quickly filled up the previously-empty granaries. A portion of these would be shelled and powdered into rations for the soldiers participating in the war.

Other than food, there were also firearms and ammunition. The soldiers recruited during the Months of Demons had already completed their basic training, and the outstanding cadets were hastily incorporated into the ranks of the First Army and given new weapons and uniforms. Those who performed average were placed in the reserve force and assigned to one of Roland's cities, where they replaced the veterans stationed there.

By doing so, Neverwinter's available military strength was rapidly increased to 5,000 men. In theory, this put them on par with the Judgement Army's numbers. However, due to limitations on transportation capacity, the further the battlefield was from Western Region, the fewer the number of soldiers who could enter battle would be.

Because Roland assessed that the Tooth Extraction Campaign would not be too difficult, he eventually decided to send out 1,500 men, with Iron Axe serving as the commander. In this expedition, the Adviser Department was absorbed into the First Army, and the key members were made up of nobles, knights and commoners from Longsong Area. This included Sir Eltek, who was Morning

Light's father, and Trevor, Chief Bodyguard of the Honeysuckle Family. The criteria was that they had to have experience in artillery warfare, or had served in the Second Army.

Although the people Roland selected were not professionals in this field, Roland trusted that they could learn on the job, and in any case, it was good to have a few more people to provide counsel to the commander. They did not possess any actual power to command. It was entirely up to Iron Axe whether to adopt their plans and advice.

After considering that the First Army might encounter the church's Pure Witch during the expedition, Roland decided that "Eye of Magic" Sylvie and "Confinement Cage" Iffy would be following them as well. The former could detect magic power and alert the army to the enemies' positions, while the latter could capture Pure Witch under the right circumstances. Sylvie would also bring along a Sigil of Listening so that she could contact Neverwinter at any time. As a result of these preparations, an army with modern military structures, firepower, and communication capabilities slowly began to take shape.

The Tooth Extraction Campaign was mainly targeted at Redwater City, Silver City and Impassable Castle, the three cities which were closest in distance to Western Region. The preparation for the expedition required four days of time. Apart from choosing which of his reliable guards to send towards the old holy city, Roland spent the rest of the time discussing various details of the war together with the commander and the Adviser Department.

One such detail, which Roland found difficult to resolve, was the

location where they would intercept the enemy.

Everyone had their own views on this issue, and nobody could convince anyone else that they were right.

The commander of the gun battalion, Brian, was adamant that the army should intercept the enemy within Western Region. His reasoning was very substantial. "The battle has to be carried out in Western Region for the First Army to fully utilize its advantage in firepower. With our paddle steamers providing logistical support, we'll be able to replenish ammunition and manpower in less than a day. No matter how long the battle drags on, we can be assured of victory. This distance from their base will also be extremely disadvantageous to the church. If they cannot break through within a month, they won't even have any food left."

Conversely, Edith was the main advocate of fighting outside the Western Region. "Do you really think that they'll have no food? Do you know how many church believers there are in the Kingdom of Graycastle? Even if all of the churches are burned to the ground, the Pope simply has to issue an order and these people will bring all the food they have to the Judgement Army. Mid-July is also the ripening season of wheat. As long as the enemy occupies one or two cities, they'll surely have a continuous supply of food. And this is not the scariest thing. Don't we already know that the church possesses Pills of Madness which can turn ordinary people into enchanted monsters? If the war situation turns bad for them, they may willfully force the commoners in these places to consume these pills, and manipulate them to fight against our army so as to wear us down. What will we do then?"

"You don't understand anything about gunpowder weapons." Van'er was on Brian's side regarding this issue. "Transporting cannons and ammunition is very costly and difficult. They aren't like swords, which can be used many times. A single battle will require many ships to replenish the supplies that are expended. If we do as you say and intercept the enemy before they enter our kingdom, what will we do when we run out of ammunition?"

"I admit that I don't understand gunpowder weapons, nor the specific methods which your army uses to fight. What I do know is that the objective is the most important thing in a battle. If we cannot achieve our intended objective, even victory will be a failure." Edith remained unrelenting. "His Majesty needs every one of his citizens. How can you allow the church to enter our kingdom and wantonly destroy the populace?"

"If we cannot win the battle, everything else is meaningless."

"What we have to do is to solve those problems that seem unsolvable."

The only two people present who could provide a final verdict were Roland and Iron Axe. However, whenever Roland was around, Iron Axe would never speak more than he needed to. No matter what order Roland issued, he would agree and execute it unconditionally. As both viewpoints in this argument had their pros and cons, Roland was not able to make a decision immediately.

The most effective way of using gunpowder weapons in battle was to set up a crossfire net and wait for the enemy to enter it. The

Western Region was undoubtedly the ideal location for something like this. However, if the church indeed used his citizens as a vanguard for their army, his losses would be huge. While the army's weapons could easily subdue the enchanted people, the population loss would be hard to make up for in the short term.

It was only on the day before the army set out that Sir Eltek made a suggestion which brought an end to this dispute.

"Why don't we place our troops and supplies in the border cities in advance?" He suggested while stroking his beard. "This way, we can substantially shorten the transport distances."

Brian shook his head in disapproval without giving the idea a second thought. "That's only possible if we can know beforehand where the church will be attacking from."

"Sir, the Northern Region doesn't have enough riverways. If we gather our troops in the wrong positions, we may even be unable to catch up with the enemy's movement." Carter added. "Furthermore, the border between Kingdom of Graycastle and Kingdom of Dawn is very long. We won't be able to keep watch on every passageway."

"It's true that we don't know where the enemy will attack from. But we can induce them to attack from a particular point."

Everyone was stumped when they heard this suggestion. After a long while, Brian frowned and remarked. "I'm afraid that only the Pope can do something like this."

Meanwhile, Edith revealed a thoughtful expression on her face.

Sir Eltek was unperturbed by the sarcastic response he received. He candidly replied, "The truth is, I got the idea from Miss Edith. If we can estimate the time of the church's invasion based on the transportation of food supplies, then the church would also be able to detect the approaching of war based on changes in our border cities."

"Coldwind Ridge!" Edith suddenly exclaimed.

"Indeed." The old knight laughed. "If we amass supplies in Coldwind Ridge and station the First Army in the nearby Deepvalley Town, we can be confident of directing the enemy to attack from a certain route, agree?"

"How so?" Brian remained puzzled.

"Because Coldwind Ridge is too near to the holy city," Edith explained. "Rather than wait for the church to attack, it's better for us to assume an offensive stance and compel them to concentrate their forces in this area."

"I see." Roland was quick to understand what was going on. Deepvalley Town was the only town connected to the central network of rivers. Although it was far away, his fleet of paddle steamers would be able to ship large quantities of supplies over there within one or two months, while the last leg of the transportation journey, which had to be done by land, could be



reduced to only three days. Although a number of supplies might not be completely sufficient, it would at least be able to maintain a large-scale battle for some time. Of course, a better way would be to set up a defense line below Coldwind Ridge and wait for the enemy to enter the position that was made up of bunkers, barb wires and trenches.

"What if they insist on not going this way?" Van'er enquired.

"Then the holy city of Hermes will be completely flattened," Roland answered.

## Chapter 583: Anna's Secret

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When Anna opened her eyes, she saw that all around her was a fiery red. Scorching hot air blew directly at her face and scalded her skin.

Blazing flames.

The blazing flames were everywhere. Smoke billowed from the lower part of the shed and caused her to choke.

She heard cries from the back room, but was unsure if it was just a hallucination. As wood came into contact with the flames, they let out a crackling sound. Every now and then, she would notice sparks and splinters fall from overhead. She got off her haystack and tried to make her way towards the back room, but was quickly repelled by incoming heat waves.

Eventually, she scrambled her way out of the shed, and watched helplessly as her house was engulfed by the raging flames.

Her neighbors started to crowd around as well. Some tried to help put out the fire. However, the nearest water source was Redwater River, which was located outside the town. The few pots of water which they did their best to fetch had no effect on the fire at all.

After Anna rushed back and forth several times, she suddenly saw the figure of her father.

He had hurried back from the mines. He was still wearing his soiled coat and his face was covered with dark gray dust. He stood beside the house, which had been reduced to its wooden frames, and stared blankly at it.

As though she saw her tower of strength, Anna could no longer suppress the fear and panic in her heart, and tears began to roll down her face like pearls. She cried and screamed as she ran towards her father and held on to him tightly.

However, her father did not comfort her as she hoped.

"Where's your mother?" He grabbed her by the shoulder so violently that it caused her to squeal in pain. "And your brother!"

Anna shook her head, but did not expect that what followed would be a slap on the face.

"Did you actually escape alone? Why didn't you rescue them?"

"Damn, how can you only care about yourself?"

Anna suddenly sat bolt upright in her bed, panting heavily. The scolding voice continued to reverberate beside her ears and refused to go away.

This dream again.

She picked up a cup from the bedside table and gulped down the cold water. It took her quite a long time to recover fully.

On the first day of every month, Anna would dream of this scene. It was as if there was someone in her brain who had to constantly remind her of the past. She turned her head and examined the calendar on her desk. Today happened to be the last day of the first week of summer, and also the day of the month that the Witch Union distributed the salaries.

She washed herself simply and put on her clothes. Then she walked out of the castle and headed towards the Witch Building in the backyard.

"Sister Anna!" Ring grinned upon the sight of her. "You've come so early!"

"Good morning." Wendy greeted and laughed softly. "The weather today seems good. Will you still be going to the North Slope Mountain later?"

"Lady... Anna." Her two former classmates hurriedly bowed in respect.

"Call me Anna, just like the old times." She waved her hands, took a seat at one side of a long table, and pondered for a moment before answering. "I have some other things to do first. I'll only be going in the afternoon."

"Oh? That's rare." Wendy revealed a spirited expression. "Could it be that you and His Majesty Roland are..."

"Are they going shopping!" Ring shouted excitedly.

Pearl and Grayrabbit, who were listening on one side, laughed uncontrollably.

Anna shook her head in denial but did not say anything further.

Neither did Wendy continue to ask. She took out an envelope from a drawer and placed it in Anna's hands. "This is the month's salary. Two gold royals."

"Thank you."

Witches did not have to prepare what they ate or wore, nor did they have to pay for rent or transport. They would even be given free prototypes of the luxury goods sold in the convenience market, and could request for more or newer items easily. Therefore, most witches felt that their salaries were not of much use, and did not understand why His Majesty insisted on paying them. Only Anna was able to guess why Roland did so. Furthermore, this measure inadvertently did her a favor.

She walked back to the castle hall while holding onto her salary envelope. When she reached, she saw that the Chief Knight, Carter Lannis, was already waiting there.

"Miss Anna." Carter stood up and greeted her. "Shall we proceed as usual?"

"Yes." She took a gold royal out of the envelope and handed it to the knight. "Let's go."

...

During the reconstruction of Border Town, the natives were each given a new lodging. Anna's father was no exception.

After he sold Anna for a price of 25 gold royals to the church, she never had any contact with him again.

From that moment, she no longer considered him her father.

However, there were some things which Anna could not completely walk away from.

For example, the gold royal which she let Carter pass to her father as the cost of living.

Like most poor people who suddenly received a windfall, her father did not hold on to the sale money for too long. Within half a year, he became penniless by gambling, as well as being a victim of fraud and theft. At that time, Anna was not yet well known, but her talent was spotted by natives when she used her fire abilities to

mend the gaps in the city walls. Her father tried to depute a neighbor to visit Anna, but was invariably rejected and ridiculed. When Carter, who was then in charge of organizing the militia, heard about this matter, he disclosed it to Anna.

From then on, she knew that she had to do something in order to keep her father quiet.

She did not wish to see him cause trouble to Roland.

She walked with Carter to a quiet neighborhood in the east of the city and went up to the second floor of a building.

Carter turned his head back to face her. "Miss Anna, wait for me here."

"Sorry to trouble you."

"No, it's nothing much." He walked up to a door and knocked forcefully on it.

After a while, the door creaked open. "Ah... it's you, Knight Sir, I..."

"Why did you take so long to open the door, are you deaf!" Carter yelled. "Move aside and don't stand in the doorway."

"Yes, yes..."

Perhaps this is the way things should be.

Anna leaned against a wall along the corridor and heaved a sigh of relief.

In all honesty, she did not want to care about her once father at all, but she knew that matters would only get worse if she completely disregarded him. Furthermore, she could not approach him by herself, or else, this bigoted and conceited man would act as though he was still her father, and the deterrence effect would be lost.

Rather than pleading him not to do anything, it was better to let him know that there was now a world of difference in their societal status. As the renowned Chief Knight, Carter was considered to be a great noble among the commoners of the Border Area. By having him deliver the gold royal as hush money together with a few sentences of harsh warnings, it should be sufficient to keep the old man quiet, and thus ensure that there would be no trouble for Roland.

Anna did not understand this kind of relationship in the past.

After she was captured and imprisoned, she lost interest in everything and her world turned completely dead gray. It was only when Roland rescued her that her world became colorful again. After living in the castle for a period of time, she gradually understood the complex relationships between people, and also the reasons why her father was angry at her.



But she abhorred these kinds of convoluted things.

She could only be truly relaxed when she was with Roland.

Or when she was reading the books which recorded intriguing knowledge—although they appeared complicated and incomprehensible at first, after prolonged reading, one would discover that the relationships between different things were simple and direct, and would not change because of new interests or desires. She wondered why the real world did not turn out to be as clean and tidy as the formulas which explained its workings.

The door opened again. After a brief moment of flattering voices urging him to stay, Carter returned to her side and said, "Miss Anna, it's done."

"Okay." Anna could breathe a lot easier now that the matter was settled. "Don't tell His Majesty."

"Of course... I understand."

She nodded in approval and turned to walk downstairs.

Although she could never get rid of these terrible feelings, she knew that with Roland, the pleasant things in life would only keep increasing. She could not wait to proceed to the North Slope Mountain to continue her research work.

That was a place she was actually fond of.

# Chapter 584: The Estuary

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After nearly four months, Lotus had a different feeling when she returned to Border Town.

The town had developed rapidly, and even the heavy snow did not stop its expansion. She had this particular feeling every time she was on the Redwater Bridge.

The factories located on the south bank of the river were arrayed like a neat square, and the dock area across the river had expanded more than several times. Concrete boats with black smoke moving back and forth on the river almost covered the glittering surface of the river.

"It's much more crowded than Sleeping Island. There are a lot of people, and they look like ants down there." Honey leaned against the railings of the bridge looking down.

"I agree," said Lotus. She had not understood why His Highness had wanted such a broad bridge and felt that it had been a waste of materials when the bridge was being constructed. Now, however, she thought that his decision was proven to be right.

Occasionally, people moving across the river via the bridge would glance up at them, curious about their odd dress and appearance.

In other cities, Lotus would think about how to escape at moments like this, but she did not need to worry about her safety here.

In addition to the changes one could see, there were still many more improvements in life, naked to the eye.

For example, the heating system that made people feel warm, the electric lamps that lit up the night and new, delicious food like ice cream and so on. Evelyn and Candle could talk about those changes in their life with her for a whole day, but those were not what surprised Lotus the most.

She thought the biggest change was the relation between witches and ordinary people.

And this could be seen in Evelyn's tavern.

The tavern was funded by the Witch Union. Evelyn was the manager and bartender, serving guests who visited the Western Region delicious blended wines. It was His Majesty's idea that they should spend some of their savings on business instead of keeping it hidden inside their drawers.

Lotus had been invited by Wendy to have two glasses of iced apple fruit wine. The taste was exquisite, much more aromatic than oat wine and mixed with a delicate fruit flavor. The drinks also looked quite attractive, and you could see the clear pale green liquid through the transparent crystal glass. The environment there was not like that of the ordinary pubs which were often noisy and chaotic. Instead, the guests were sitting elegantly in their own seats, and the floor, tables and drinking vessels were all clean and tidy. She would not consider the place a pub, if it were not for the

row of barrels behind the counter.

Of course, the experience corresponded with the high prices of the drinks.

Evelyn stood in front of the counter, having conversations with her guests and nobody reproached her because she was a witch. Instead, many foreign businessmen came over to drink due to curiosity. Lotus had seldom seen Evelyn smile so happily, and she knew Evelyn really liked the job.

Lotus recalled that most of the activities of witches had been basically within the castle area before she had left, and the witches had often been protected by His Majesty's bodyguards when they needed to go out. But now they were gradually being assimilated into every part of the town.

It was incredible that such changes could be made within just one season.

Talking with Wendy that evening gave Lotus a deeper understanding. She believed perhaps that was the reason why the witches of the Witch Union were willing to do their best.

They were not only building Neverwinter for His Majesty Roland, but also building their home.

"Let's go. Today we'll complete the transformation of the estuary if everything goes smoothly," Lotus said to Honey.

"Yay!"

...

When the last piece of rock sank into the ground, Lotus wiped the sweat off her forehead and took a deep breath.

"Awesome, you really made a road through the mountain." Honey applauded.

Meanwhile, the row of birds crouched in the treetop above her head tweeted.

"Of course, there's nothing I can't do," said Lotus proudly.

Unlike the reefs surrounding Sleeping Island, the rock layer here was much deeper and harder, so it was much more difficult to transform it. Fortunately, she did not need to transform the entire mountain into flat ground. According to His Majesty's plan, she just needed to build a passageway that could allow five or six carriages to pass side by side. Thinking of the iron bridge, this time she did not consider such a spacious road a waste.

Since the hills were more than forty meters above sea level, the easiest way to build the road was by sinking the ground gradually until it turned into a long, gentle slope.

In order to facilitate the passage of carriages, she purposely pressed the rock layer on the surface of the hills into a level road surface. By doing so, even if it rained, puddles of water would not form on the surface of the road.

Now, if you were standing on top of the slope, you could see the golden shallow beach and the blue sea, and you could feel the cool sea breeze blowing along the slope with a familiar salty smell.

"Did you bring fire?" Honey bounded toward her.

"No, what do you want to do?"

"Roast fish, of course!" Honey smiled and added, "How about you drive them out to the top of the water's surface when I attract them here? We can just put them under the sun for two days if we don't have fire."

The birds above her head tweeted even more merrily.

Lotus rolled her eyes and said, "I don't want to smell salted fish everywhere! Besides, haven't you got bored of it? You ate so many on Sleeping Island!"

"Hmm? I feel it was quite good," Honey said while tilting her head.

"Anyway, putting fish under the sun is forbidden here. His Majesty doesn't like the smell of fish, either." Lotus suddenly

remembered Ashes and was not sure whether she was still plagued from eating fish soup on Sleeping Island. "His Majesty said he plans to build a harbor, so Lady Tilly can come here anytime she wants, and she won't need to come by hot air balloon anymore."

When Lady Tilly was mentioned, this attracted Honey's attention. "So... will she come?"

Her expression was even simpler than that of an animal. Lotus patted her fluffy hair, saying, "I have no idea, but soon His Majesty has to fight against the church, so she must come to help her brother."

Actually, Lotus was not sure, especially after she had heard all the details of the Bloodfang Association and Heidi Morgan. In the past, she had not liked the pompous attitude of the combat witches, but now it seemed that they were also quite pitiable.

After she stopped holding prejudice against them, she realized that they were actually not that different from herself. At least now, she could have a short conversation with Iffy once in a while. The combat witches on the island, however, would not be persuaded by Tilly easily.

"Yay, that's great!"

Lotus sighed inwardly. This little girl knew nothing about war. If Lady Tilly failed to solve the Bloodfang Association's problem, and the church attacked His Majesty Roland at the same time, it would mean big trouble.



Despite that, she still wished that Lady Tilly could come to Border Town again.

And she also wished Lady Tilly could stay here forever.

Then the wish she had made in the winter would come true

"Thus, all the witches including myself could live happily in Border Town," Lotus thought.

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# Chapter 585: The Day of Embarkment

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Three days later, 1,500 soldiers of the Tooth Extraction Campaign boarded their ships and headed for their first destination, Redwater City.

At the same time, according to strategic planning, the other soldiers of the First Army would escort the ammunition and food to the Northern Region. They would follow the inland water path, pass through Redwater River, the King's City river, Sanwan River, and reach Deepvalley Town in the end.

In order to cope with such a large-scale deployment, Roland gathered all the paddle steamers in City of Neverwinter and also rented 30 sailing ships from Margerie's Chamber of Commerce to deliver war materials.

By doing so, he could send three thousand soldiers and artillery ammunition to the Northern Region within a month, which was even before July. In the modern world, transporting a few thousands of people could be completed by just three or four ferries in one trip. But in this era, this was an incredible initiative.

The vanguards would also move towards the Northern Region after they had accumulated enough God's Stones of Retaliation during the Tooth Extraction Campaign, and finally 4,500 soldiers would gather at Deepvalley Town and force the church to have a war with them at Coldwind Ridge.

Of course, there was always a plan B, in case the church

responded too quickly, sending a troop of God's Punishment Army to move southward across the Impassable Mountain Range and launched a surprise attack at City of Neverwinter, or that they abandoned Holy City and tried to enter the kingdom from the border between Kingdom of Dawn and Kingdom of Graycastle.

The five hundred men defending City of Neverwinter were prepared for the first situation. Defenders always got a certain advantage, especially with the 152 mm stronghold cannon. As for the second situation, it would result in a lose-lose situation. Under such circumstances, the First Army would resort to a war of attrition and Kingdom of Graycastle would lose lots of people, meanwhile the church would lose Holy City of Hermes and their faith and status would also suffer.

Fortunately, it was almost impossible for the second case to happen. The population of Kingdom of Graycastle would increase after the war, but the church could not afford to lose Holy City, their foundation. As long as the pope was not frantic, they would never abandon their Holy City.

The Pearl of the Northern Region, Edith Kant, followed the first fleet to leave, too.

"Please don't worry Your Majesty, I'll write a letter to inform my father to send half of his grains to the soldiers, and the Lord of Deepvalley Town will also try his best to fulfill any request from the First Army."

"Aren't you going back to the Northern Region?" asked Roland.

"I'd like to follow the first army and to participate in all the coming battles instead of going back home," said Edith, who stood on the side of the ship. She raised her hair and bowed, saying, "Please take care of my brother for me."

"I'll take care of him."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, I'll wait for you in Deepvalley Town, for the real great war."

After the ship left, Nightingale complained. "Tut-tut, the war is a life-and-death matter, but she talks about it as if she's going to a date."

"Uhm... does she?"

"Don't you realize it? The action of raising her hair... There's no wind blowing. Why did she take the trouble to do it?" Nightingale snorted and added, "of course, it may be her habit to seduce men with such a gesture and it's already a habit."

"Are you still upset by the letter?" Roland shook his head and did not know whether to laugh or cry. "I've told you, it's impossible. By the way, did she lie?"

Nightingale reluctantly replied, "Basically, no. At least when she expressed allegiance and talked about those combat arrangements, she said the truth."

"That's enough. Let's go back to the castle." Roland took a breath and said.

City of Neverwinter was under pressure due to the coming war, but there was good news too. The projects that had been planned during Months of Demons were completed one by one, and the basic infrastructure was greatly enhanced.

The most important finished project was the Western Region's own estuary.

After the estuary was completed, Roland informed the Ministry of Construction immediately. Soon some houses, warehouses and temporary docks were built on deepwater port. With a natural deepwater harbor, larger ships could now be built, but as Anna had already focused on producing military equipment, the shipbuilding plan would be postponed until the end of the war.

The supporting hub project, the construction of Highway 67, had also started. That road would begin from the bank of the Redwater River Bridge and connect the industrial area with the south of Shallow Beach. Its construction team was the same as that of the Kingdom Main Street project. Roland also fulfilled his promise, to make nearly half of the workers, that performed outstandingly, qualify as residents of City of Neverwinter and issued identity cards to them.

Besides, the first coke oven in North Slope Mountain was also put into production mode during this period of time.

To be precise, it could have started earlier, but it had had many setbacks during the test run. For example, at the first time of trial, the furnace had not been vented and the air used for dry distillation burnt directly. At another time, the temperature and timing had not been well controlled, resulted in coking failure. There had even been a serious accident, when the exhaust pipe had been clogged with dust and the flame had got out of the furnace. Fortunately, as Summer had the ability to playback what had happened before, the problems of the process were quickly identified and fixed. A new batch of improved coke ovens was in full swing construction.

Besides basic infrastructure, military production also stepped up.

The howitzer, an important new weapon designed for the war, was finally a success.

Despite the limited size of its shells and the limited speed of reloading, it was still a fatal weapon in the radius of ten meters. Combined with debris, it could affect an even bigger area, twice or three times as large as the original coverage.

Several 152 mm artillery could hit targets nearly ten kilometers away, which meant that they were able to strike the rear of the enemy directly, and now the shock waves and debris of the howitzer could destroy the defenseless enemy there completely. This kind of war was completely beyond the imagination of the people in this era.

Unfortunately, a heavy howitzer could only be delivered with the assistance of Hummingbirds and when there was no hard-surface concrete road, only two howitzers could be used on the battlefield.

Even so, Roland was not willing to give up such a powerful firepower.

In contrast, the news about the successful operation of the steam turbine was not so important.

After all, whether it was a new type of steam-powered boat or thermal power generation, there was not enough manpower for research and development. In a sense, after receiving the message from Kingdom of Dawn, City of Neverwinter had entered the wartime system, and all of the resources had to divert to give way to the preparation for war, Anna being no exception.

In the morning, she processed artillery shells and fuzes, and in the afternoon, she cut key parts used in heavy machine guns. Those were what she had to do everyday.

The arsenal operated on three shifts for the production of bullets and revolving rifles. Thanks to Mystery Moon and Candle, all kinds of machine tools ran at maximum capacity in production without a big problem.

Shortly after returning to the office, Roland received a letter carried by the carrier pigeon from Fjords.

This is... the reply from Tilly?

Roland quickly opened the letter and soon finished reading the contents. Pondering for a moment, he asked Nightingale to get Maggie.

"Bring Soraya to catch the leaving fleet. Let Iffy do what's suggested in the letter."

"Coo!"



# Chapter 586: The Battle of Redwater City

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After two days of sailing, blocks of villages and farmland began to appear on the desolate green field, and the city wall of Redwater City gradually came into sight.

As the biggest city in Redwater River, its population and resources could compare favorably with the old king's city. If it was not for the advantage brought by the minerals in Silver City, ancestors in the Wimbledon family would have made Redwater City the king's city instead of the current City of Dawn.

Brian observed through a telescope for a while and asked, "What will we do when we arrive at the wharf? How about shocking them first with the naval artillery?"

"It may provoke their lord's hostility." Iron Axe shook his head. "Our main target is the church. Other things can be put aside. According to diplomatic process, we present the documents first."

When the fleet arrived at the suburban wharf, great turmoil began at once. The gate closed quickly, and the drawbridge of the moat was pulled up while the soldiers concentrated in line outside the wharf.

Brian sent out the documents and received a prompt reply.

"He said His Majesty's army is welcomed by the lord, but we are required to send an envoy into the city to explain the conditions. He will not open the gate and let us enter until he verifies the cause

of the matter," the soldier reported.

"What conditions? We've already explained very clearly in the documents," Brian said crossly, "We are only against the church. Does he want to help those church scoundrels escape?"

"Is this also your rule?" Iron Axe turned back and looked at the accompanying members in the Adviser Group.

"Um... yes, it should be if they're nobles," Petrov's Chief bodyguard Trevor answered, "and it's normal for them to be skeptical, after all, His Majesty, Roland himself hasn't come and Redwater City is not in his jurisdiction. We only need to send an envoy with suitable status to explain clearly."

"Suitable status?"

"Someone from a large family who can earn the lord's trust," Trevor explained further, "like the Honeysuckle family in the Western Region."

Iron Axe, Brian, and Van'er looked at each other with embarrassment. Before they'd become the commanders of the First Army, one was of the Sand Nation, the other two were civilians. They didn't know how to properly converse with the nobles, nor did they have a suitable status which could help them to talk to the castellan equally.

"Why not blast the gate directly with cannons," Brian got angry

and said, "Once they feel our attack they'll know what the right way is."

"Allow me," Edith said, "The Kant family is an aristocratic family in the north and my father is also a duke. I'm qualified."

"What if it's a trick?" Van'er hesitated and said, "If the Lord of Redwater City colluded with the church long ago, they might arrest you when you enter and force us to withdraw."

"It's not good for him and you won't compromise, will you?" Edith smiled and said, "As long as he is in his right mind, he won't plan such a move on the envoys or he would arouse other noble's antipathy. And it can't affect the overall situation. On the contrary, if he had colluded with the church, the city would have been blocked in the state of battle. There hasn't been any hot oil or bonfire set up in the top of the city yet."

"I'll go with her," Sir Eltek said, "I was once a knight and I can take care of her if there's a danger."

"I appreciate your concern, but the Pearl of the Northern Region doesn't need any care," Edith said with confidence.

"Bring a team of soldiers with you." Iron Axe made the final decision. "If we hear a shot, we'll start an attack."

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An hour later, the gate was opened slowly, and the drawbridge was lowered.

They were stunned when Miss Edith and a chubby middle-aged man came out under the escort of a small group from the First Army and a group from the Silver Armored Knights. The man was well-dressed but courted Edith like a henchman from his obvious expression and behavior.

"This is the Lord of Redwater City, Earl Delta," Edith introduced the lord to them and added, "I also asked him to send the patrol to surround the church in case the priest and believers escape." Then she shifted her head and said, "These are the commanders of His Highness's First Army, Lord Iron Axe, Mr. Brian and Mr. Van'er."

"Iron Axe... and what?" The earl was stunned for a while to hear such kind of introduction for the first time.

"Never mind." She laughed. "This is His Highness's terminology."

"Ahem, I see." Delta cleared his throat and said, "I have heard that Prince Roland... no, His Majesty acts in a different style, really not common. So... welcome to Redwater City. Excuse me, His Majesty indeed just wants to wipe out the insurgents of the church?"

This was the Lord of the Redwater City? Brian wondered in amazement. He was quite different from what Brian had imagined.

"Yes," Iron Axe answered in earnest, nodding, "I think it's clear in the documents of His Majesty that the church is trying to occupy the Four Kingdoms and their rebellion has become a fact. You should have heard the calamity that happened in the Kingdoms of Everwinter and Wolfheart. We'll leave once we clear out the church's people."

"Well, it is not necessary to be in such hurry," Delta rubbed his hands and said, "and tonight I'll hold a grand feast in the castle. I hope all of you can attend."

Although he was inviting everyone, his eyes focused on the Pearl of the Northern Region.

Brian was going to refuse but Edith accepted without hesitation. "Thank you for your invitation. It will be an honor but we have to complete His Majesty's task first."

"Sure." The earl smiled with slanted eyes.

...

The First Army entered the city in order under the guidance of the knights. Avoiding the earl's attention, Brian walked close to Edith and chided her in a low voice. "Why did you accept his invitation? He definitely has other, indecent intentions!"

"This is the normal communication between the nobles. It would be too rude if we refused," she replied in a dismissive tone. "I don't

know why His Majesty excludes the nobility from his army, but you represent His Majesty, Roland so you can't refuse these things entirely. And it'll be much easier to recover Redwater City on the basis of a good relationship with him. As for his indecent intention..." She twitched her mouth, "Is there any other facial expression a male noble can show?"

"Err..." Brian swallowed with difficulty and sighed after a moment. "So, you're used to this kind of life?"

"It's not bad, just a tad boring." Edith said with a little satire. "Well, haven't you ever admired the life of a noble?"

"I..." He opened his mouth but could find no words.

Suddenly, there was turmoil up ahead. It seemed that someone was shouting, and they could hear something fall to the ground.

"What happened?" the Earl called out.

Iron Axe clenched his right hand into a fist and shouted, "All soldiers, stand by! On the alert!"

The troops stopped marching immediately. The soldiers took their rifles from their backsides expertly and changed quickly from columns to rows.

At this moment, Sylvie warned from the middle of the team with a loud voice. "Watch out! There's magic reaction in front!"

# Chapter 587: A Nameless Victim

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"Magic reaction?" Earl Delta turned around and asked, "What's that?"

"Tell your knights to step aside now!" Brian had no time to think about etiquette and shouted at him.

He had barely finished speaking when a group of believers, in indigo robes, popped out from around the corner and rushed into the guiding knights. The force was so great that the horses were immediately knocked over and several knights found themselves pinned under their heavy mounts before they even realized what had happened. The other knights immediately drew their swords and began to fight with the believers.

The people on the street panicked and ran, causing many to fall and get trampled by the fleeing crowd. The sounds of people crying for help could be heard everywhere and the site was a complete mess.

"Tr... Treason!" The Earl was shocked, at first, and then he became furious. "Damn it! Kill all the rebels!"

But, a piece of flying slate shut him up.

It had been part of the pavement and more pieces of slate rose up in the air and swiftly headed toward a knight. It happened so fast that all anyone could see was a fleeting green shadow. The first person who was hit quickly started to bleed profusely from his

joints and eyes. His armor immediately crumbled and it would have been impossible for him to survive.

After that, more pieces of slate flew around, even taking out some of the believers. The vertical pieces of slate were shattering peoples bones, while the horizontal slates were cutting them in half.

Before Earl Delta could even feel shocked, Brian quickly pulled him aside.

"Fire!" Iron Axe ordered.

Gunshots continuously rang out across the street.

The people who were still standing erect got mowed down like a wheat crop and once the gunpowder plume dissipated there was a littering of wounded knights and believers across the battlefield. For a short time, the field had been pure chaos, now there were bodies scattered everywhere, some of them were still gasping feebly while others moaned in pain, continuing to writhe on the ground.

"Where are the enemies?" Brian stared at the street corner without so much as blinking, as if he were facing a formidable enemy.

"Enemies... They all fell, didn't they?" the Earl asked bewildered, apparently in shock. He obviously had not expected that His



Majesty's troops would be so strong. A dozen silver armored knights and unstoppable believers became disabled in almost the blink of an eye.

"It's coming!" Sylvie said in a hoarse voice.

As if responding to her warning, a woman appeared from around the corner, she was rolling up the street slates like giant carpet wheels and making them float in the air one by one.

Heavy gunshots rang out again. Most of the slate was torn apart immediately while one piece of slate spun and swept along the crowd like a thick, unmanned sword.

Oh, no! Brian's heart sank. From the way it appears, a flintlock isn't going to break down the rotating slate quickly enough. He didn't want to imagine what was going to happen when the soldiers were hit. They were not wearing armor like the knights and the casualties were going to be significantly higher. And, yet, they had no choice but to continue fighting.

Just after Brian had this realization, a purple light suddenly appeared in front of the troops.

It was a cage made of magic power and it enveloped the incoming slate, shrinking rapidly, stopping the rotating rock abruptly.

"Is this an enemy... or a witch?" Earl Delta stood in a daze.

It wasn't until all of the floating slate had finally fallen did the First Army cease-fire.

The cloud of heavy smoke from the gunpowder blurred their eyesight. The smell of sulfur pervaded the air, but no one dared to rub their eyes or even cough. Except for the sound of guns loading, the field was completely silent, for the moment.

"Was it Miss Sylvie?" Iron Axe asked.

"The Magic Power... It disappeared," she said slowly.

This meant that either the enemies had fled the battlefield or they had perished during the fight.

After the smoke dissipated, Brian could see what had happened.

A woman was laying on the pavement in a pool of blood, her thick, curly, dark green hair mixing with the sanguine fluid.

Brian loosened his grip on the terrified Earl's shoulder and walked towards the woman, her red and white priestess' cloth revealing her identity.

There were two palm-sized wounds penetrating the stomach and abdomen of the Pure Witch, from which dark streams of blood drained. Apparently, the bullet still had force after penetrating the slate and had torn straight through her body. The multiple slices on her arms and legs must have been caused by the ricocheting

stones.

Even though her enemies had the God's Stone of Retaliation, she was still able to roll up the slates and use them as shields. This way she could attack the enemies with the remaining slates and keep her enemies at a distance. However, she had not expected the flintlocks to be that powerful.

Looking back now, she might have been shot during the first round of gunshots but she was still able to manipulate the slate. Her willpower had been remarkable.

"Is she really a witch from the church?" Delta moved closer, cautiously.

"Wasn't His Majesty clear in the pamphlet that was distributed in King's City?" Brian replied with annoyance. "The church not only poisoned the common people with the Berserk Pills, but they also train witches to serve them in secret. Only the innocent girls that were framed by the church stand on our side. Have you not heard any of this before?"

"Actually, I had heard this before, but it seemed unbelievable..."

This is just a small portion of the despicable acts committed by the church, and the nobles weren't much better Brian thought to himself, but he didn't say a word.

Edith was also shocked by this brief conflict.

This was her first time seeing the combat abilities of the flintlock troops. The whole process looked like a storm and all the soldiers needed to do was stand still. In this regard, His Majesty's troops were physically at an advantage. One could imagine that the larger the scale of warfare the more obvious the guns advantage would be.

There was no doubt that the traditional combat forms, where soldiers fought with thick armors and sharp weapons, had now shifted to a newer model.

Moreover, with those machines roaring day and night, they could keep producing these weapons in the western region. This made it easy to imagine how great a war potential His Majesty had in his domain.

It wasn't until Iron Axe had ordered the troops to keep moving, that Edith was able to recover herself.

However, her belief was firmer that her choice was the right one.

The First Army took a turn at the street corner and soon came to the church's front door. There were several bodies lying on the ground and judging from their clothing, most of them belonged to the patrol team.

They soon realized what had transpired. Just as the patrol ordered the blockade of the church, more than two hundred enchanted people were suddenly killed and the lords were swept

away. Some of the believers stayed to wrestle with the patrol team, while others created chaos in the outer city, where some people were attempting to break through the gate. Fortunately, the First Army was less than 300 feet from the church and they were able to confront the Pure Witch. If they had been even 15 minutes later, the Pure Witch would have likely escaped during the chaos.

Brian immediately lead a team into the church, where they eliminated the remaining resisters.

Next was ransacking the place to find any documents, letters, or usable goods. According to his Majesty, taking anything of value was a requirement.

Then, under Sylvie's guidance, the soldiers used small packets of explosives to blow up the iron gate blocking the basement. The people that were present all strained their eyes to see what laid behind the slowly falling gate.

In nice orderly rows, there were over ten boxes of the God's Stone of Retaliation, and surrounding it were tidy stacks of gold.

# Chapter 588: A Knight and You

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At night, the halls of Redwater City Castle were glowing with light. Servants carrying wine glasses were walking through the crowd. Musicians were singing softly while plucking on the strings of their instruments. Enticing dishes were set on the table one by one, and goblets filled with red wine shone brightly.

The noblemen and women split into groups of two or three and chatted happily with wine in their hands. Edith was the focus of people's eyes. She was moving around in the hall with Earl Delta and very much seemed to enjoy such a social event.

Brian, however, felt totally alienated from the whole crowd.

He felt the collar of his bottoming shirt choking him and his slim fit coat restricting the movement of his arms, not to mention the extremely uncomfortable pointy toe high heel boots on his feet. He could not really understand how come the nobles could dart around on the very slippery floor wearing those shoes.

Brian could not help but envy Van'er who did not have to suffer from this as the guard of the First Army's battalion,

but he immediately stood taller when he thought that Edith had reminded them that they were here to represent His Majesty Roland.

Someone suddenly patted his shoulder, saying, "You look quite tense. Is this the first time you've come to attend a banquet like

this?"

He turned around and found that it was Sir Eltek who dressed in broad shoulder formal attire with a white scarf around his neck, looking completely different from his everyday look.

"Relax, you don't have to be so nervous."

"I'm not..."

"It's not a bad thing. No one is good at everything. It's not a big deal," Sir Eltek threw up his hands and said.

After a moment of silence, Brian asked, "where is Lord Iron Axe?"

"He's escorting the witches, Miss Iffy and Miss Sylvie. They seem as popular as Miss Edith." Eltek pointed to the other side of the hall and said.

Brian looked at that direction and saw the witches. They also looked very stiff in the dresses that Edith found for them in the last-minute rush. However, they were still attractive and seemed to be even more beautiful than the Pearl of Northern Region. "Those people have no idea who they are, and Lord Iron Axe is actually not protecting the witches," Brian said.

"Oh, is it?" Sir Eltek shook his beard a little.

Brian nodded and explained. "To be more accurate, he's protecting the nobles. If Miss Iffy is irritated, they'll suffer."

They then looked at each other and giggled simultaneously.

"Look, now you're relaxed and natural."

"I..." Brian froze for awhile and said, "thank you."

"Hah, you're welcome," Sir Eltek said and then he beckoned a servant. He picked up a glass of wine and turned to Brian, asking, "would you like a drink?"

"No... His Majesty has said that a military man on duty should never drink wine."

"No wine, even when he's resting?"

"It's a rule."

"Alright." Sir Elteck sipped the wine alone and added, "what a pity."

"You think..." Brian hesitated and continued. "What Miss Edith has said is true?"

"Such as?"



"A knight should never refuse invitations to such occasions at his will, because he represents His Majesty."

"Uhm... That's true." Sir Eltek nodded and said.

Brian felt dejected, suddenly saying, "I'm not qualified to be a knight. I can't behave in such a natural, relaxed manner like her on these kind of occasions."

"It's okay," Sir Eltek said while spreading his hands. "Some people are just naturally good at it and some are not. Indeed, a knight who stands out at a banquet can bring his lord glory, praises and even diplomatic advantages, but that's not all about being a knight. Actually, my son is also bad at social events for the nobles."

"You mean... Morning Light?"

"Yes, he seldom spends time with the other nobles and was even frequently absent from social events held by the lord. However, no one can deny that he's an excellent knight."

"I don't know this side of Mr. Ferlin," Brian said in great surprise.

"There's a lot you don't know about him." Sir Eltek smiled and added, "he's stubborn as a stone. He filled me with rage by marrying a civilian woman. I cut him off at that time but then I found out that I was wrong. I could find no fault with Ms. Irene. She's as good as any noble lady, except that she doesn't have a

noble title. It was hard for both of them at that time." Sir Eltek stopped and changed the subject, "I heard that you fought a bloody battle against the rebels to protect the grain preparation for Border Town?"

"Uhm... Actually, it was Lady Nightingale who stopped them. If it was not for her, I'm afraid I'd already be dead in the basement." Brian said with a little embarrassment.

"But at least, you stepped forward, right? It's much braver than most of the other nobles who have only the titles but not the courage to fight against their enemies. I think that His Majesty did not dub you a knight for your social skills. You're a qualified knight as long as you remain who you are."

"I see," Brian felt touched and said, "thank you for telling me that."

"It's all right. Take it as a casual chat between us. Seeing you reminded me of Ferlin, so I couldn't hold my tongue," Sir Eltek said while touching his beard.

After a while, Brian asked in a muffled voice. "So, what about the other thing that Miss Edith has mentioned? The social activities of the nobles are boring and dull..."

"You really care about her, don't you?" Sir Eltek watched Brian with interest.

"No, no! I'm just curious." Brian promptly waved his hands and explained, "she disapproved of these kind of activities at that time, but now you can see that she seems to enjoy it very much."

"Well," Sir Eltek smacked his lips and said. "What should I say? Some people can handle everything properly, even when they don't like to do some of those things. I think Miss Edith is a strong performer among those people."

"Properly cope with unenjoyable things?"

"It's not a rare thing," Sir Eltek shrugged and continued. "They're gifted and naturally good at many things, but that doesn't mean they like everything that they have to do. After all, as a Duke's daughter, social skills are already in her blood."

"His Majesty needs someone like her," Brian sighed.

"Maybe," Sir Eltek said noncommittally, "But that doesn't mean His Majesty doesn't need other kinds of people. As I've said before, no one is good at everything. Focusing on what you're best at is not worse than covering everything, as there's a limit to a man's energy. That's why you're also well recognized by His Majesty..." Eltek paused momentarily and added, "I think he's right based on the changes I've seen in the City of Neverwinter."

# Chapter 589: The Storm in the Fjords

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A storm was brewing on the sea to the east of the Fjords islands.

Every now and then, lightning struck through the gray clouds that hung low in the sky. Muffled thunders like the angry roars of the gods in the sky sounded as if they came from far away.

Heidi Morgan's mood was no better than the weather.

She had not received any news since she sent Iffy and Softfeathers to the western region.

She understood that the long distance would make it difficult to send any message back, but she also knew that Honey was there in the western region of the Kingdom of Graycastle. That meant that they could threaten her and seize one of her animal messengers to send a message.

"What's really going on in the domain of the lord?"

Heidi thought and irritably shut the window to block the howling wind.

The situation on Sleeping Island was getting worse and worse for her. Since Tilly started the Sleeping Spell, all non-combat witches were on her side and facts had also proven that the ordinary people of the Fjords showed a greater need for assistant witches. As this place did not face any enemy now, the local chambers of commerce

hired witches mainly for commercial purposes or opening new water channels.

Under such circumstances, the status of the weak witches was raised rapidly and now seemed on equal terms with the combat witches.

Besides, there were common people.

"Damn it, how come I didn't think of this," Heidi thought bitterly. She had thought that if she represented the combat witches all the time, she would not lag behind Tilly, as there were only two groups of people on the island. However, as more and more ordinary people immigrated to the island, the third group formed. Those people recognized and trusted only Tilly since they were only influenced by the local chambers of commerce. As a result, Tilly left the island almost routinely to visit the other islands as a distinguished guest, especially after she gained Thunder's support.

The thought drove of this drove Heidi into a blind rage. She believed that Tilly made friends with ordinary people in the name of promoting integration only for the purpose of increasing her own influence.

Heidi thought Tilly was deceiving everyone.

Tilly was selling the home of witches to the ordinary people bit by bit.

If things went on like this, she would never be able to replace Tilly Wimbledon.

This was the first time that Heidi found there was little she could do about a 20-year-old girl. Heidi's intention of leaving Sleeping Island with the combat witches was stronger than before. She wanted to ask Camilla, the Chief Butler of Sleeping Island, when could the Charming Beauty take them to the western region. But just at the moment, her door was pushed open.

"My lady, I've something urgent to report!" Skyflare rushed in and said, looking anxious.

"What's going on?"

Seeing the look on her face, Heidi could not help but feel surprised, as Skyflare was the best and had followed her for the longest time among the witches of her association.

"There's a new witch here on Sleeping Island. I heard that her name was Annie!"

"So what?" Heidi said in confusion. It's not a rare thing that wild witches came to Sleeping Island after the merchants got the news out.

"She's from Kingdom of Wolfheart!" Skyflare said in a muffled voice, "I've met her before!"

Thunder suddenly crashed in the sky!

Heidi's heart skipped a beat and soon realized what Skyflare meant by 'urgent', saying, "you mean she's the one Bloodfang Association has rejected. It's impossible! She may just be her namesake."

"I thought that way at the beginning, but she looked very similar to the Annie I had met several years ago. I hid in the crowd to steal a glance at her when she was carried into the palace."

"Are you sure?"

"My lady, I'm not sure about the other witches but Annie is different... Back then, she brought a friend with her. That was Iffy." Skyflare grated and continued, "Iffy cried all the way for Annie, wanting to go back, so I remembered her appearance."

"How could this happen? They should be..." Heidi grabbed Skyflare by collar and asked, "did you let her go?"

"No, my lady, I did what you ordered me to do! Please believe me. I'll never betray you!" Skyflare argued.

Heidi looked into her eyes and then slowly released her, asking, "what happened to her? You said that she was carried into the palace just now."

Skyflare took a breath and said, "she seemed to be infected with a

cold epidemic and was seriously ill. The keep has already sent someone to invite Della."

Della cannot cure a cold epidemic but she could calm a patient down by cutting off the pain. Heidi paced back and forth in the room for a while and asked, "Tilly isn't here on the island, right?"

"Yes, she went to Twin Dragon Island two days ago. She seemed to be busy with the preparation for the exploration of the sea."

Heidi stopped and said, "bring Nightfall here and let Shaji go to get more information. Shaji has never seen Annie, so she won't be recognized."

"Yes, my lady!"

...

It began to pour. Raindrops pattered against the window, and Heidi sat by the table speechlessly. Skyflare and Nightfall stood aside, waiting for Heidi's order. The atmosphere was quite tense.

A burst of rapid footsteps broke the silence.

The door was opened and then shut again. Shaji returned and leaned against the door. She took off her wet clothing and straw hat and then heaved a long sigh. "That witch called Annie is already asleep. According to Della, her condition is not good, as the cold epidemic has already infected her lungs. She must have been



ill for quite a long time."

"Is it? So what's Camilla planning to do?" Heidi said in a grave tone.

"She said there's a witch in the western region of the Kingdom of Graycastle who could cure all kinds of diseases. She's going to send Annie to the western region when the rainstorm stops."

Heidi felt so irritated that she wanted to laugh. Hiring One-eyed Jack for a round trip in the Fjords would cost nearly 100 gold royals. Camilla always found excuses to refuse her requests for traveling to the other islands or to the Kingdom of Graycastle, but now for a useless, strange witch, she was willing to send out the Charming Beauty?

There was another thing she found completely intolerable. If Annie went to the western region and met Iffy, what she had done before would be exposed.

No matter what, she had to make Annie stay on the island or shut up forever.

Heidi contained her anger and turned to Nightfall. "You can make her sleep forever, right?"

Nightfall winced and said, "you mean... Seed of Peaceful Death? Yes, I can, but why..."

"Because she's a traitor of Bloodfang Association! You don't have to know the details. Just remember she can't be excused." Heidi impatiently interrupted.

"Is she also a combat witch? Why not wait for Tilly before making the decision? If it's found out, we'll get in trouble." Nightfall questioned.

Heidi squinted, saying, "Bloodfang Association will 'take care' of its traitors. If we hand her over to Tilly, will the naive girl punish her? What's wrong with you? Do you want to disobey my command?"

"Of course, no... My lady, I'm willing to take care of this traitor for you." Nightfall shivered and promised.

# Chapter 590: The Witches War

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"Damn it," Heidi thought indignantly, "These witches' minds have already begun to fall apart, and they would have never bothered to ask why they do what they do when they were in Archduke Island. The enemies of the Bloodfang Association must be taken care of."

The environment could influence a person. The ferocious cliff wolves lived in the mountains, and the dumb dogs lived in the warm house. Through the Sleeping Spell, assistant witches brought in many gold royals and goods for the island, turning this place into a haven. Even the combat witches had started believing Tilly's nonsense talk. Apparently, she did not have much time left to deal with it.

"You can control the attack time of the Seed of Peaceful Death, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, when you implant the seed in Annie's body, don't make it take effect instantly, and kill her silently when she boards the Charming Beauty," Heidi nodded and said, "Now we shall visit this traitor, Annie."

When Annie died on the ship as if from the cold plague, the crews would throw her body into the ocean to avoid infection. No one would ever know the truth.

"Shall I attack her in broad daylight?" Nightfall was surprised.

"It would be more suspicious if you did it at night. Besides, I'm not sure whether Camilla will let me into the palace or not." Heidi glanced over at her. "Shaji just learned that a witch from Kingdom of Wolfheart is sick. Isn't it pretty normal that the Bloodfang Association which represents Kingdom of Wolfheart come to visit her?"

"You're right, my lady." Skyflare lifted the Hood from behind her cope. "If anything happens to Annie, Tilly and Camilla would still suspect us even if we weren't there."

Opening the door, the harsh wind mixed with rain swarmed into the room. Putting on her raincoat and waving to the two of them, Heidi walked out into the storm.

She was determined to do it.

...

Camilla Dary appeared in the doorway as the three of them walked into the palace's compound. "What do you..."

"I heard from Shaji that a Kingdom of Wolfheart's witch has arrived here." Heidi Morgan shrugged. "It's said that her condition is pretty bad, so we came to visit her."

"Annie has fallen asleep under Della's conciliation. I suppose

you'd better leave her alone."

"Her name does ring a bell, so we just want to have a peek. We suppose maybe she was a part of us and got lost when we ran away from Archduke Island."

"This..." After a moment's hesitation, Camilla said, "Okay, come in."

Heidi was fed up with this conversation. A common witch dared to treat this place as her own turf and considered herself as the Chief Butler of Sleeping Island. Heidi sneered secretively. This woman was just Tilly's dog. If she had not said 'come in' at last, Heidi would have taught her a lesson.

On Sleeping Island, most of the abodes relied on Lotus to rise from the underground, so there were very few multi-story buildings here. Tilly's palace was no exception.

Going through the long corridor to the side room, Camilla leaned over and said, "She's in the room."

"Mm." Heidi could not wait to walk into the room. She shook her head to give a signal to Skyflare.

After carefully examining the girl who was lying in bed with her eyes closed, Skyflare nodded slightly.

"So, who sent her here?" Heidi came up to Camilla and whispered

to her. It looked like an act of concern, but it was actually to block her view, so Nightfall could implant the Seed of Peaceful Death into Annie's body.

Instead of answering her, Camilla gave her an odd expression.

"Why are you trying to kill her?"

Heidi was confounded. Before she could do anything, Nightfall behind her had already cried out, "This witch is a fake."

Turning violently, Heidi saw that the girl lying in bed had already disappeared, Nightfall could only see the magic power cohere as a small black ball suspended in midair.

"Seed of Peaceful Death. You really can go so far." Camilla shook her head. "I thought you were just speaking of the combat witch, but I didn't expect that you're a brutal murderer."

"Shut up!" Heidi's anger was out of control. She used a fatal magic power and flew at Camilla. But by the time she could reach Camilla, the girl's figure had turned into mist.

Now Heidi knew what had happened.

"Shadow, come out." She gritted her teeth.

There were hurried footsteps rising from the corridor. The

witches hiding in the dark were evacuating from this place fully.

"Skyflare, get her!"

"Yes." The latter dashed out of the side room, took a deep breath, and breathed out a stream of red flames. The flames crept along the walls and chased the targets as if it had its own consciousness. It burnt the windows and doorframes along the way.

"Ah!" A scream came from far away.

Nightfall hurriedly said, "My lady, we need to get out of here as soon as possible! They lied to you. This whole thing is a trap!"

"Get away from the window." Shadow's scream made Heidi feel better, but she also knew that they could not stay here very long. She just could not understand how Tilly could know what had happened to the Bloodfang Association years ago.

Out of the palace, the three of them stopped.

In the heavy rain, a black-haired woman stood in the courtyard. Her eyes shone like golden stars, which could be clearly seen even in the mist of the rain. The three of them felt fear even though she stood without weapons.

It was the Extraordinary Ashes.

Usually, she would stay with Tilly Wimbledon.

Turning her head, Heidi saw two familiar figures appear in the palace's doorway,

Andrea and Shadow. Shadow was making faces at the three of them nonchalantly. Apparently, the previous scream had been fake.

If they were both here, it meant that Tilly had not left Sleeping Island at all.

Heidi was at an absolute loss after realizing the truth.

"Don't bother to explain. I can spare your life if you give in now," Ashes said this word by word.

No one would think she was bluffing. As an Extraordinary, she was a natural enemy of all witches as long as she wore the God's Stone of Retaliation. Heidi would have taken action earlier if it were not for her.

But there was still a chance they could win.

The breakthrough was at the palace's doorway. She could threaten Ashes if she could capture Ashes' two partners.

Without hesitation, she grabbed Nightfall and rushed toward the



front door of the palace. "Skyflare, stop Ashes!"

As a combat witch, dagger and crossbow were the best weapons she could use when her magic power could not be exerted. Skyflare pulled out her dagger and dashed toward Ashes. Nightfall knew her intentions so at the same time she summoned the Seed of Symbiosis.

A threat was useless unless fear supports it. Heidi had already made up her mind to kill one of them, and leave one as hostage. Of course, Shadow who had taunted her for such a long time, was her main target.

But seeing Andrea hold a long bar in her hand calmly, she was shocked.

What was that?

Then a loud roar made her fall into a deep torpor.

# Chapter 591: The New Journey

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Heidi slipped and fell in the rain, the flowing rain pouring into her mouth, nose, and collar.

It was hard to describe her true feelings. Although she did not feel much pain in her body, she was powerless after the fall.

"Don't worry about me. Go and kill her!" she shouted out not even bothering to examine her injuries.

But Nightfall disappointed her.

The combat witch from the Bloodfang Association hesitated, then stopped and came back to her finally, asking, "My lady, are you alright?"

"Moron! We could only turn the tables if we seized them. If we couldn't, what was the point of staying unharmed?" She wanted to vent her anger but found that she was too tired to open her mouth and say anything.

Behind her, she heard Skyflare's scream, and the fights gradually died away.

It was very difficult for her to resist long when faced with the Extraordinary, Ashes.

The paralytic feeling in her body began to fade, but a nervous flush along her thighs which pricked painfully was very noticeable once she was soaked with the rain.

Heidi managed to look up but only saw Andrea walking slowly toward her.

"Don't you want to give up resistance?"

"Yes," Nightfall answered, she turned around and knelt down. "I give in. Please don't kill Lady Heidi."

Andrea wiped the water on her head and said, "If I intended to kill her, she'd be dead by now. Her Highness Tilly hasn't yet figured something out, so I must spare her life for now. As soon as all the evidence against her is certain, she'll be justly punished."

"Evidence?" Nightfall was at a loss. "Annie betrayed the Bloodfang Association's witches, this is why my lady planned to harm her."

"Oh? Is that what she told you? As far as I'm concerned, Annie never joined the Bloodfang Association." Andrea shrugged. "You'll know what kind of person she is when the truth is revealed." Then she turned and shouted to Shadow, "Go and fetch Pandora to stop the bleeding from her wounds, or she'll be doomed."

At that moment Heidi finally felt the pain, and her whole leg could not move. It felt like a mass of heaviness beneath her yet did

not belong to her. A sharp pain in her leg replaced the burning feeling, making her feel a bit better.

It was over.

And she knew exactly what would happen next.

Tilly must have somehow learned the truth about her since she dared to do this. It was not difficult to find the truth with a bit of clue. Even if the Sleeping Island's witches could not find the truth, those people in the Western Region could.

She was afraid this had something to do with Iffy and Softfeathers.

She had belittled Tilly.

Heidi thought for a moment. Then she gritted her teeth and released her magic power with her last ounce of strength just as Andrea turned her head.

She could destroy anything hollow within 10 steps from the inside, whether they were living things or vessels.

She called it Power of Pulverizing.

Although a defeat was inevitable, Heidi was not willing to let Tilly win so easily. At least she wanted to teach Tilly an

unforgettable lesson.

"No, my lady!" Nightfall noticed and cried out.

It was too late! Heidi sneered secretively.

But her power did not take effect.

An invisible barrier dispersed her Power of Pulverizing.

"You're wearing the God's Stone of Retaliation!" Heidi mumbled with dilated eyes. "Wait. The thing that had hurt me wasn't Andrea's new ability?"

"You do seem quite energetic, you incorrigible bi\*ch," Andrea said with disgust, raising the iron bar and smashing it with all her might.

Heidi was instantly blind.

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"This is the end." Seeing Heidi Morgan and Skyflare being carried away, Andrea asked Ashes, "So how are things on your end?"

"It's okay, but I'm afraid that Skyflare may not survive until the day when we arrive in the Western Region."

"Lady Tilly said to keep them alive if possible. Why did you do it?" she said with a look of disdain.

Ashes licked the raindrop at the corner of her mouth and said, "I never thought she would be so desperate and risk her life to win. Besides, she does have technical fighting skills. Of course, I could have captured her alive, but I worried that something might go wrong at the essential moment. So I had to do it quickly."

"You..." Andrea was speechless.

The Extraordinary sighed. "If you had shown the Glassbead earlier, maybe they wouldn't have risked their lives in the end. But you chose to hold the flintlock, how could they know what it was?"

"Stop arguing. Lady Tilly is still waiting for your report." Shadow reminded them helplessly. "Besides, you can't stand in the rain and argue. What if you get typhoid?"

The two looked at each other for a moment, and then exchanged a despised look to end this argument, walking side by side to the palace.

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After giving her report, Andrea noticed that Tilly did not look well. After solving this great trouble, Tilly did not look happy or relieved. On the contrary, she seemed a little glum.

Ashes took her hands in hers and asked, "What's the matter. Are you sick?"

Tilly shook her head. "When I first saw Roland's letter, I didn't believe what was in it," she said with a sentimental tone, "We witches have finally found our own home. Why did they want to repeat the tragedy of the past years? Isn't it better to live in this place and be satisfied?"

"You've done a great job." Ashes comforted her, saying, "Not all the combat witches will unconditionally accept Heidi's way of doing things, especially when our living standards have improved. Some of them have already supported us, even members of the Bloodfang Association are no exception."

"She's right," said Andrea. Although she did not like Ashes, Andrea did not want to upset Tilly. "The fact that Nightfall didn't obey Heidi and fight to the death is proof. Given time, all the people will gather together firmly, just like the Witch Union."

"I hope so." Tilly took a deep breath. "Since Heidi did this, I can't indulge her anymore. But according to Iffy's view, most of the witches in the Bloodfang Association knew nothing about it, so later I'll ask Camilla to call them here. If they're willing to stay here and wait for results, we won't treat them as enemies."

The two nodded. Sleeping Island had finally become boisterous, so no one wished these people to leave.

"When the storm is over, we'll bring Heidi to the Western Region," she continued.

"To fight against the church?" Ashes was excited.

"Yes," Closing her eyes, Tilly said in a low voice, "To fight against the Judgement Army, God's Punishment Army, Pure Witches and the Battle of Divine Will. Just as Roland said in his letters, witches will embrace real liberation if we can completely crush down the church. I would help him even if he wasn't my brother, for it helps me too." She paused for a while. "Care to join me?"

"Of course," Ashes answered without hesitation, "I'll always be with you."

Andrea nodded, but oddly enough, the smell of ice cream bread appeared in her mind.



# Chapter 592: An Unexpected Change

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Roland sat in his office while listening to the news from the frontline.

"The drawbridge... beep... of Silver City had been put down... beep... We're going... beep... to break into the church... beep..."

"Got it, be careful," Nightingale replied.

"It seems that this is the maximum range of communication." Roland spread the map, drawing a circle on the position of Silver City. "We should set up a relay station here in order to directly contact the Eastern and Northern Regions."

He had been obsessed with the feeling of being in complete control of the situation from far away since he had Sigils of Listening. The quick exchange of information seemed to bring him back to modern times. At this moment, he felt like sitting in a command hall, controlling every phase of the war situation.

Just like Tracking Sigil, however, which could not guide accurately beyond its valid range, Sigil of Listening was also limited by distance. The voice would not keep clear and steady if one sigil was too far away from another. To deliver his commands to the whole country, he needed at least one transfer station.

"But the number of sigils isn't enough. You've only made four pairs, and an action like the Tooth Extraction Campaign would need two pairs. It's not easy to catch a demon twice," Nightingale

said and placed a piece of dried fish between her lips.

Roland noticed this problem, too. As the sigils permitted only one-way information transmission, the witches had to hold two sigils; one for sending the information and the other one for receiving, in order to achieve the effect of an instant message system.

It could be considered extremely efficient compared to a carrier pigeon or human messenger.

According to Agatha, the sigils could be further improved,

Its quality depended on the magic power of the blood mixed during the making process. For example, the effect of Sigil of Listening produced by Anna was better. Given that, mixing her blood with a senior demon's blood during the process, created a pair of Sigil of Listening that was powerful enough to cover the entire Kingdom of Graycastle.

"Beep... There's something wrong... Beep... Just wait a minute..."

Sylvie said intermittently. Hearing that by the table, Nightingale and Roland brightened into alert attention.

"Pure witches? Or the moving black holes of magic power?" Nightingale swallowed the piece of dried fish and asked.

They could directly fire at the former, but the latter, which could

be believers of the church who wore God's stones or the God's Punishment Army who could naturally resist the magic power, were hard to deal with.

"No... Beep... I didn't see the reaction of... Beep... God's stones..."

"No God's stones?" Roland asked, frowning.

"No... There's nothing... beep... in the church..." The sound paused for a moment. "We... are going in... Beep... The basement is empty..."

Nightingale and Roland looked at each other, speechless, wondering whether the church had escaped or not?

"It's possible," said Roland, and chagrined for a while. "I was too cautious."

As of now, the First Army was the most unstoppable in the country, and no noble was stupid enough to go right into the king's line of fire, but some might still send secret messages to the church. For the church, it was a natural choice to retreat with all the supplies of the city, thinking there was no chance of winning. Different from the battles which captured Longsong Stronghold and Fallen Dragon Ridge, the nobles probably chose to be onlookers during this war. After he seized Redwater City, the churches in the other cities may have already received messages delivered via pigeons, which noted: "Prince Roland is searching for God's Stones of Retaliation".

"If we'd divided the army into three groups to attack the three cities at the same time, we would've conquered them all," said Roland.

"It's hard to say. After all, only Sylvie can see through the ambushes of the enemies. If one group had encountered powerful pure witches, the troops would have suffered a heavy loss. Your decision wasn't bad," Nightingale said lifting a piece of dried fish to his mouth.

Roland was taken by surprise. He bit the dried fish and said, "You become comforting now."

She gave him a sly grin and said, "Do you feel better now? If not, I can massage your shoulders. Wendy taught me a massage technique that'll make you relaxed."

"Wendy?"

Nightingale raised her eyebrows and said, "She's very versatile. You know, the Witch Cooperation Association trekked a long distance and suffered a lot. It was Wendy who took care of our sisters and stabilized our team. No one could do better than her. If it was not for her, Cara's bad temper would have driven everyone away."

Roland rubbed his chin for a while. There were not any government affairs to deal with for now, and the First Army had successfully entered Silver City. Given that, he thought it was just the time to have a break.

He was about to accept Nightingale's massage when the magic stones in her arms alerted again.

This time the voice was very clear, like a shout in the ear.

"It's Lightning, repeat, it's Lightning, do you copy?"

As the witches were lacking in entertainments, Roland chose some wonderful stories for them in nature courses to improve their interests in studies and enrich their knowledge. Since Lightning heard the story that sky could be conquered by pilots, she had been addicted to their advanced conversation mode.

Roland, however, still felt a little awkward communicating this way. After Nightingale activated another group of magic stones, Roland cleared his throat and said, "I've got you, speak please."

"The Red Mist behind the snow mountain disappeared... No, it's disappearing!"

"What? Are you sure?" Roland and Nightingale asked simultaneously.

"Yes, Maggie is here, too. You can ask her!"

"The Red Mist has indeed faded away! Coo."

"It's not right. You should say 'this is Maggie', and then report."

"Coo coo?"

"Where are you now? Don't get close to Devil's Town, and hurry back now," Roland said, trying to control their impulses to explore. If they chose to fly directly into Devil's Town to investigate and encountered a senior demon there, they would be in real trouble.

"Got it!" Lightning replied quickly.

"Get Agatha for me. Maybe only she knows what's going on," Roland said to Nightingale.

Since the witches killed the Magic Slayer, he had been monitoring the demons behind the snow-capped mountains. There was one Animal Messenger in each troop who guarded the coal carrier ships that went to the source of the Redwater River in batches of four or five. Besides, he ordered Lightning and Maggie to practice between the snow mountain and the Mist Forest in case of a surprise attack of demons.

The demons, however, did not take their revenge, and now even the Red Mist began to fade away.

Agatha soon came to the office, but after listening carefully to the report from Lightning, she was also puzzled. "The Union could rarely get close to Devil's Town, and I'd never heard of their retreat during battles, even in the wars that lasted for several decades."

"Keep monitoring them for now." Roland made the decision at last. "Perhaps the Red Mist will come back, we should be cautious."

He did not want to put any witch's life at risk for now.

Five days later, Lightning reported that the Red Mist behind the snow mountains had completely disappeared.

# Chapter 593: The Blackstone Forest

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A reconnaissance platoon was established soon after confirming no trace of the demons in the camp.

To find out the cause for the Red Mist's disappearance, Maggie led the probe into the camp carrying Agatha, followed by Soraya and Summer who were not capable of escaping were thus protected by 50 soldiers of the First Army.

"We're about to arrive. Get ready to land!" said Lightning, who made a gesture towards Maggie,

"Awh!"

Agatha poked her head up and the Rocky Beach gradually came into her sight. As the little girl said, the heavy Red Mist had vanished completely, revealing the dark brown earth. Different from the dark green forest around, no trees were there in the camp area which looked as if the soil surface was torn off.

This was the first time that Agatha had approached a residence of demons.

As a member of the Quest Society, Agatha could not help but feel a burst of excitement.



"Lightning is landing! Repeat, Lightning is landing."

"Be careful! Remember to escape immediately if there is any danger." Roland's voice came through the sigil.

"Lightning understands."

Folding her wings, Maggie dived sharply towards the ground.

Agatha saw the landscape under her feet changing rapidly, from the blue ocean to the off-white rugged rocky wall, and then to the humid brown land. After a sudden shock, Agatha found that the huge Devilbeast had already landed safely.

"Do the demons really live in such a place? Looking from the sky, there's nothing special in this place but now it really looks weird," Lightning clicked her tongue and said.

Agatha felt the same way.

The swarthy stone towers stood high on the empty ground everywhere, like a black forest in picturesque disorder. These strange buildings were the black spots that they had seen from above. The height of the higher buildings was about three to four stories and that of the lower ones were just taller than their heads. In terms of the density, these building far surpassed that of a forefront battalion.

It seemed that these stone towers had some functions other than

the storage of the Red Mist.

"I don't know what happened to them, but it must have happened not long ago," she said.

"Why do you say that?" Lightning asked with curiosity.

"As the stone towers haven't withered completely." Agatha pointed to a nearest Blackstone Pagoda and said. "Their surfaces simply dimmed, far from being rough and fragile. They look totally different from the barren land that the Union conquered in the frontline. That means, the demons didn't intend to withdraw, or... they just made a hasty decision to retreat." She paused momentarily and said, "let's go to the center of the camp, the highest tower, where the Eye Demon lived. Maybe we can find something else."

"Hope Summer can find the cause... Ah!" Lightning screamed suddenly. She was walking in the front, but instantly sunk into the ground. Seeing the frightening scene, Maggie transformed into a pigeon to fly up immediately, and Agatha also conjured up an ice barrier in front of herself.

Before they took any further action, the little girl flew out of the hole in the ground and said, "I'm okay." She flapped her body to clear away the dirt and complained. "Who dug a trap here?!"

"What a naughty gremlin!" Agatha sighed with relief inwardly and prepared to disperse the ice barrier. Yet the following words of Lightning made her heart jump in her throat again.

"Uh! Here's a demon!"

"It's true, but the demon seems to be dead," Maggie perched on the head of Lightning and said.

"Maybe. Otherwise, I would be in trouble," the little girl patted her chest and said, still quite scared.

Holding an ice spear in hand, Agatha came over to have a look. As Maggie said, a Mad Demon stood in the soil pit with its head slouching, and a chunk of its bare skin had dried and curled, like the salted fish exposed to the scorching sun.

"I remember Sylvie once said that the demons were hiding under the ground, right?" Agatha said and further confirmed her judgement. Whether the demons decided to withdraw or met with some other incident at that moment, it must have been some emergency. Otherwise, these demons wouldn't die by exhausting the Red Mist underground little by little before receiving the new orders.

"We'd better fly to investigate. I don't want to fall in a trap again," Lightning mumbled.

Carrying Agatha on her back, Lightning flew forward slowly, remaining close to the ground. After they bypassed rows of stone towers, they suddenly got a wider view.

An open field in the camp appeared.

"It's..." Agatha gasped and said. Judging from the spot, it was obvious that the open field was not left deliberately by the demons, as a huge cavern could be seen in the center of it. It had a size almost equal to that of the square of Border Town, and many debris of the stone tower scattered around it. The three witches stood by the bottomless hole and looked down attempting to see where it led to.

"It seems the same as the place where we found you. How about let me go down and explore first?" Lightning smacked her lips and said.

"NO! You can't."

"No, coo!"

Agatha and Maggie stopped Lightning at the same time.

"Okay," the little girl said and sighed with a look of regret. She had restrained herself a lot from her desires to take risks after being punished by His Majesty to do test questions. "So, let's take a walk around it."

The rest of the place in the camp had slight differences. Of course, the exploration of the three witches was not fruitless. Maggie found a large number of Magic Stones in a flat-roofed stone tower and a withered, dead Chaos Beast. Actually, she just wanted

to perch on the top of the tower for a while, but happened to find a narrow entrance there, which may serve as an air duct that the demons used to imbue the Red Mist.

The First Army arrived at Rocky Beach two days later.

Lotus found a slit chapped in the mountain, and dug a path out in the rocky wall, which could allow only one person to go through. Maggie, at the same time, was responsible for transporting the important equipment like heavy machine guns. It took great effort to deliver 50 soldiers and witches into the inland area.

This was the first contact between the indigenous people and the alien demon race.

Even the hardest soldier would feel dread and panic at the sight of such an incredible scene. Roland had expected that and ordered his people to pitch a camp nearby the entrance to the rocky wall to avoid overstraining themselves. As for Summer's replaying work, the First Army was not allowed to watch.

According to Agatha's judgement, the time at which the high tower in the camp disappeared should be between one and half a weeks to one month ago. The consumption of Summer's magic power would be accelerated if the retrospective time exceeded one week. As for the events that happened one month ago, they could only be replayed once a day. Under such circumstances, there was no shortcut except for trying again and again.

Among the Magic Stones brought back by Maggie, there were

some practical ones. The quality of these Magic Stones could not match with those obtained from Fearsome Demons, but it was better than nothing. Now the Spellcaster Tower to be completed soon only lacks a living demon.

It would take a long time to find the accurate time of the incident that happened to the demons. Roland developed new gadgets as he waited for the result. He received the second secret letter from the Fjords.

It said that Tilly Wimbledon was about to arrive at Shallow Beach of the Western Region.

# Chapter 594: Shallow Beach and Reunion

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"What a pleasant surprise," thought Roland.

Out of his expectation, Tilly herself would also come here instead of just sending several combat witches to help him. That meant she had already solved the trouble on Sleeping Island, or that she did not have to worry about the stability of the island for now.

The day after he received the letter, Roland waited for Tilly at Shallow Beach with Anna and the other witches.

After half a month, traces of chiseling could clearly be seen on the beach of sand and mud.

Simple wooden board houses and work sheds had already been built around the slope, which were the prototype of the future warehouse and sailor dormitory. The windward sides of the wooden houses were painted with an orange anti-corrosion coating to protect them from the sea wind, and meanwhile, the coating also made the houses look very nice and striking. A 30 meters long beachhead was leveled, and its external side was made of bricks. It now worked as a temporary dock, and the natural deep-water harbor here even saved Roland the trouble of building trestle. Even the three-masted ships could berth here directly by the side of the dock.

As it was the first time for most of the witches to see Shallow Beach during the development stage, they all looked around with curiosity.

"Is that huge pit the collapsed shipyard? What're they doing over there right now?" Anna walked to Roland and then pointed to a distant place where many workers seemed very busy with their jobs.

"Uhm, you've heard about it, too," Roland said with a little embarrassment.

"Of course, Nana told me on the day that three workers broke their legs."

The collapse of the shipyard and the explosion of the coke oven in a test run were both major accidents of this year in the Border Area. The latter could be considered as a price he had to pay during development and exploration. The former, however, was mostly caused by his own careless mistakes.

Given the soft ground condition in Shallow Beach, Minister of Construction, Karl, had proposed that the shipyard should be built near the hills as the place could provide them a more solid foundation. Roland, however, had refused Karl's suggestion at once because of the time limit. As it had already taken a long time to build the slope by sinking the hills, if they built the shipyard in the old way, he would have to wait until the next year to begin building the steam vessel for Thunder.

As for the soft-foundation problem, he had thought it was not a big deal, as long as he let Lotus build a steel structure of the shipyard and poured concrete in to protect it.



The project had gone well as he had expected in the initial stage. The vertical walls which had been designed to protect the steel structure had seemed to be quite sturdy after the concrete had set. Roland had been very pleased with himself at the time, thinking that those civil engineering experts were just so-so. To his surprise, an accident had eventually happened when the workers had been installing the portcullis.

As soon as the one arm thick portcullis had been released by Hummingbirds, it had fallen down with the concrete walls on its both sides, burying the installing workers inside. Even though the Hummingbirds had immediately made the portcullis as light as a feather, the workers had already been heavily injured at the time. None of them could survive, if it was not for Nana.

Later investigation revealed that during the process of pouring the concrete, some sand and mud had sunk under the workers' feet and fallen to the bottom, as a result, the vertical walls had not tightly clung to the floor and the seemingly sturdy joining parts between the floor and the vertical walls were just a thin layer of concrete. The moment when the heavy portcullis had been set into the wall, the steel structure had failed to sustain the weight and collapsed with the walls suddenly.

In the modern time, that was a grievous fault of Roland. In this era, however, casualties frequently occurred during construction and no one would take it seriously, let alone blaming the lord for it. Only Roland himself would feel guilty and deeply sorry for the workers.

He cleared his throat to gather himself together and said, "They're building earth-retaining wall with wooden posts."

"To prevent the earth beside the shipyard from collapsing?" Anna soon got what Roland meant.

"Uhm, it's just like roots of a tree. The wooden posts are crossed and inserted into the ground to increase friction, so the vertical walls won't fall down," Roland nodded and said. This time, he would carefully check whether there were sunk sands and mud in the structure when pouring the concrete in, as he had already got his lesson.

"Look, here comes a ship!" Mystery Moon shouted in a sudden.

All the people looked at the place where the sea and the sky met and saw a sailing ship with a pink flag moving slowly towards them.

No doubt, a ship traveling round Southernmost Cape to the inland of the Western Region must be the Charming Beauty from Sleeping Island.

When the ship got close to Shallow Beach, it teetered on the sea for a while to readjust the direction before it berthed by the beach. Apparently, they had not recognized Shallow Beach at the first sight.

Roland met Tilly Wimbledon, Princess Tilly of Kingdom of

Graycastle, again.

He gave his right hand to her, and then shook hands warmly with her. They had not seen each other for several months, but seeing the smiling look on each other's face, they still felt closely connected.

"What a wonderful reunion," Roland thought.

The witches did not greet Tilly and her witches in such a reserved manner.

Honey, Candle and Evelyn immediately came up and hugged their old friends. Andrea bent her arm around Nightingale's shoulders, completely neglecting the manner of a noble lady. Wendy held Ashes' hand, asking about her recent situation. Softfeathers, however, was greatly surprised as she found that a witch of the Bloodfang Association also came with Tilly.

"Why did you come here?" Softfeathers walked to a witch who looked a little pale and asked, "Did Heidi Morgan send you here because she did not get any report from Iffy and me?"

"No, Lady Heidi is on the ship now," the witch answered while shaking her head.

"What? You mean she also comes to the Western Region?" Softfeathers exclaimed in surprise, catching everyone's attention.

It was not hard to tell from her voice that she was frightened.

"Who's Heidi?"

"She seems to be the leader of the Bloodfang Association?"

"Ah, yes. Iffy mentioned her."

"What's she going to do here?"

Roland looked at Tilly and asked, "Have you settled your differences with her?"

"If you mean controlling her right now, yes I do. My plan worked and Heidi did try to kill the Annie we faked. But she refused to tell me where the witches rejected by the Bloodfang Association went. She said she would only tell you when she saw you," Tilly said, spreading her hands.

"Me?" Roland asked confusedly.

"Yes, I guess she considers you her last life-saving straw." Tilly blinked her eye and continued, "Now you're the ruler of Graycastle, representing the secular nobles. She probably thinks if she gives you enough profits, you'll save her or even help her to regain her power in the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

"Are you reminding me of what I should do?" Roland could not

help but laugh. He had to admit that Tilly was quite cute when she pretended to be careless and beat about the bush. "Trust me. If I'm a man who'll exchange witches' lives for profits, you'll never bring her here. Well, so who's this witch I'm going to meet? I think I've never met her before."

"Nightfall, a combat witch of the Bloodfang Association. If it's not for her who uses Seed of Symbiosis to sustain Heidi's life, I'm afraid Heidi won't make it to City of Neverwinter," Tilly answered.

# Chapter 595: Germination

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"Did Heidi get hurt during the capture?"

"Uhm, she got shot in her leg. We've stopped the bleeding, but she probably can't walk for now."

"How is everyone else?"

"A witch of the Bloodfang Association named Skyflare died last night." Tilly sighed and said. "My witches are alright."

Roland nodded and said, "I'll tell Nana to cure her. As for the other things, let's talk about them after we get back to the castle."

...

Compared with interrogating the leader of the Bloodfang Association, the church invasion was the top priority for Roland now. After he returned to his office, he asked first about the situation of Sleeping Island and then showed the letter from the Northern Region to Tilly and the other witches. Ashes and Andrea were also there as the three big families in the king's city of the Kingdom of Dawn were also involved.

Since Roland received the secret warning letter, he had contacted Hill Fawkes twice to get a clear idea of what had happened. After he told the witches all he knew, Andrea could not help shaking her head and said, "Foolish Otto, he still behaves just the same as he

did when he was little. He would never dare to enter the palace without Oro."

"But at least, he succeeded in revealing what the church was doing to us. Besides, he did it mainly because of you," Ashes shrugged and said.

"Have you replied to him?" Tilly asked Roland.

"I urged him not to act rashly. As even the God's Stone of Retaliation could not affect the witch, it's almost impossible for ordinary people to defeat her. Besides, Prince Appen mentioned that there were God's Punishment Warriors too. The Kingdom of Dawn is too far away from the Kingdom of Graycastle. I can't offer him any help directly. Under such circumstances, it's a wise decision to pretend to know nothing about the church's secret until the church focuses on the Kingdom of Graycastle," Roland said while pouring tea for everyone.

"He may not be able to control himself well. Acting on impulses has been a habit of Otto Luoxi ever since he was a child," Andrea said with a frown.

"He'll control himself well, because I told him something else." Roland smiled and added, "I told him that Andrea was safe at my place, and the enemy could hardly hurt her, even if she had to fight against the church. I also warned him that if he died, he would never have the chance to meet his Andrea again."

"Very persuasive," Ashes whistled and said.

"Enough," Tilly promptly spoke at this moment in order to prevent a coming spat. She stared at Roland, blaming him for making fun of this matter and then changed the subject by asking, "What're you going to do about the church's invasion?"

"Ahem... I'm going to build a defensive line with guns and cannons under Coldwind Ridge," said Roland. He took a map out of his drawer and spread it on the desk. He pointed at the border of the Northern Region, saying, "Since I got the news, I've already sent the First Army to deliver war materials to Deepvalley Town and at the same time, to wipe out the influence of the church in my kingdom. Given that, Holy City of Hermes will soon sense the intention of Graycastle to garrison Coldwind Ridge."

"Do you want to purposely reveal your actions to your enemy? I hate to be blunt, but most of the time, the information deliberately leaked to the enemy must be false and delusive, right?" Andrea asked.

"But it's the only way that I can ensure where the church is going to attack first, and by doing so, my people will suffer less. A head-on confrontation is also what the First Army is best at in battles," Roland explained his plans.

"I see. It's a pretty good idea," Tilly nodded and said.

"But there's still a hidden danger, the pure witches. With strong firepower, we don't have to worry about the visible enemies but the witches of the church may cause unexpected troubles for the



First Army, as we know nothing about the pure witches. Only our witches with magic power can guard against them," Roland added.

"That's why we're here. Trust me, my big brother. The witches of Sleeping Island will fight with you," Tilly replied.

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Back at the Witch Building, Tilly had returned to her original apartment that she had lived in before.

The living room and bedroom looked exactly the same as she had seen them the last time. There was no dust on the table. Apparently, Roland must have often had this place cleaned.

Three wooden basins used for bathing were prominently displayed near the door. Clean clothes were nicely folded and placed in the basins and beside them, there were sandals that were easy to wear. Brought up in a royal family, Tilly had accustomed herself to taking baths regularly, but even she had never bathed so frequently like she did at this place where the warm water for bathing was available all the time.

When she followed the aroma of fresh food to open the cupboard, she found it was filled with various kinds of seasoning, dried meat floss and bread. She could easily fill her stomach any time she felt hungry.

Princess Tilly had never been a person who really cared a lot

about material comforts, but she could not help but feel warm in her heart seeing the scene.

"Ah... I can use scented soap for bathing again. Huh, the towels in the basin seem to be brand new," Andrea talked loudly in the living room.

"Isn't it good for you to have new towels?" Ashes questioned.

"Yes for me, but not for you. It's a waste to offer you a new towel."

"What did you say?"

"I think that rag you brought will do. Why does a person who can tolerate bathing in salty, smelly sea water need a towel?"

Hearing the familiar bickering voices, Tilly smiled silently. She thought that everyone seemed to like Neverwinter, and even the Bloodfang Association witches changed after they came here.

She felt that she also liked this city as everyone else did.

The improvement in life quality might be one of the reasons for the other witches' changes, but not for Princess Tilly who had been adored by King Wimbledon III. Compared to her life in the palace, the life here was just fresh and interesting, but not luxurious.

What attracted the witches the most must be another thing.

Staying in this city, Tilly would naturally feel relaxed, and yet she had no idea about why she would feel this way until today. When Roland had been pouring tea for the witches himself, she had suddenly realized.

Roland truly accepted the witches and treated them as friends instead of just pretending to be friendly to witches who could offer him help.

No matter who he was, the lord, the prince or the king, Tilly could tell that his attitude remained the same all the time.

He did consider witches as his friends, which he was not faking at all.

"Are you alright?"

Hearing Ashes behind her, she turned around and saw that she gently closed the door of the kitchen.

"Huh?"

"Why did you call him big brother today? On Sleeping Island, didn't you say that you helped him only to help yourself? And... you said he was not like Prince Roland at all," Ashes hesitated and asked.

"I don't think he's the stupid, cowardly elder brother of mine and I don't care whether he's him or not." Tilly paused momentarily and asked, "Have you ever considered the meaning of this war against the church?"

"Retaliation?"

"No," Tilly shook her head and said, "It means freedom of life. Have you ever thought of moving here?"

# Chapter 596: Home of the Free

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Greatly surprised, Ashes said, "What did you say? I've never thought of leaving you."

"That's not what I mean. To tell the truth, this place is not bad... and you like it, right?" Tilly explained, finding out that Ashes misunderstood her.

After a moment of hesitation, Ashes nodded and said, "The Witch Cooperation Association must have their reason to stay here and work for Roland, but we're different. We have our own home..."

Tilly interrupted Ashes, saying, "There are only three possible endings for us in this war. The first is that we get defeated by the God's Punishment Army and die in the last ditch in the Northern Region. Under such circumstances, neither Sleeping Island nor Neverwinter matters to us anymore."

"I swear, by my life. My lady, you'll never die at that kind of place," Ashes said and hurriedly covered Princess Tilly's mouth with her hand, and even used the honorifics in her haste.

Tilly kept looking at Ashes with a smile until Ashes removed her hand, and then said, "That's just a hypothesis. I don't think I'll get killed by the church, either."

"So don't say it out loud. A frequent saying of yours is that..." Ashes said with worry.

"It'll become a self-fulfilling prophecy," Tilly added. She walked to the small window of the kitchen to look at the castle backyard which was full of energy and vitality, and she continued, "That's why I tell you this hypothesis at first. The second possibility is that Roland loses the war but we survive. That way, the Kingdom of Graycastle will no longer be able to resist the church, Neverwinter will be caught in fire and Roland will have only one place to go."

"Sleeping Island?"

"Yes, we'll continue to fight against the church on the island until the Battle of Divine Will began. Maybe the human species will be extinct hundreds of years later but there's nothing we can do as we can't live that long."

"What about the third possibility..."

"If we defeat the church and take over Holy City of Hermes, all of the witches will be free from bullying and persecution, and the Sleeping Island's mission will be fulfilled."

"Ful-fulfilled?"

"Yes, it's just the witches' hide for now. If the church is destroyed, we won't have to confine ourselves on an island of the Fjords any longer. The Fjords can't offer us a pleasant environment to live because of its limited supplies and unpredictable weather... But, of course, we won't abandon Sleeping Island and we'll continue our Sleeping Spell. The only change is that we'll be able

to choose to live in the cities we like, right?"

"I'll always stay by your side even in hell and besieged by numerous demons.

"And in the world full of salted fishes and fish soup?"

"Uhm..." Ashes suddenly did not know what to say.

Tilly could not help but laugh. She said, "Relax, eating too much of them makes me feel sick, too. I'll probably come to live in Neverwinter for a while every now and then. I also want some changes in diet."

"Hey there, what're you talking about?" Andrea pushed the door open, craned her neck to look inside and asked. She wore a bathrobe and carried a wooden basin on her head.

"What're you going to do?" Ashes asked, frowning.

"To take a bath," Andrea twitched her mouth and said, "I have stunk after staying on the ship for over ten days. Of course, it's not surprising that somebody just can't notice even such a strong smell of fish. Lady Tilly, are you going with me?"

"Yes, wait for me. I'll change my clothes," Tilly replied.

"Ahem... so am I." Ashes pretended not to hear the satire and

expressed her intention to join the bath.

"Come on, I did not invite you," Andrea rolled her eyes at Ashes and said.

"I'll accompany Tilly, not you. Don't take me wrong."

Looking at them who gazed at each other in a speechless confrontation, Tilly relaxed and began to imagine that all of them would be able to live easily and happily like they did now after they defeated the church.

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Roland had been in a daze in his office for a long time until Nightingale came in with dried fish in her hand.

Out of his expectation, Tilly who had not recognized him as her elder brother the last time when she had been here suddenly called him big brother today. Roland felt overjoyed and at the same time confused, wondering whether she really considered him as Prince Roland or just a reliable friend and guardian.

"Yeah, she called you big brother. It's not a big deal. I can call you like that if you want," Nightingale said incredulously.

"You're three years older than me. Aren't you nobles value your integrity?" Roland sighed inwardly and thought, "but it's not bad to have an elder sister as my... No, stop thinking about this



anymore." Roland banished those thoughts and asked, "What do you think that changed her attitude towards me?"

"Who knows? Maybe she saw your sincerity, as you didn't use the Bloodfang Association witches to split Sleeping Island and you quickly declared war on the church. Compared with empty promises, those actions are more convincing. But that's just my guess. Maybe, it's just a slip of tongue," Nightingale shrugged and said.

"Yes, the reason isn't as important as the facts. No matter what made Tilly change, she did get closer to me. That also means I've gained wider recognition among the Sleeping Island witches," Roland thought.

Then he said to Nightingale, "Now. it's time for us to meet Heidi Morgan."

...

Roland stepped into the jail in the basement of the castle and saw Heidi lying unconsciously in a bed made out of straw. The wound in her leg covered with black and red blood stains healed perfectly.

"To ensure Nana's safety, I knocked Heidi Morgan out before Nana started to cure her. Otherwise, it would be too dangerous to take off the God's Stone of Retaliation on her. I heard from the other Bloodfang Association witch that she tried to hold Andrea as the hostage when she was besieged," Nightingale whispered in Roland's ear.

"I see. You did a good job."

There were iron hoops mounted with God's Stones of Retaliation around Heidi's neck and wrists, and it was impossible to unlock it without special tools. They did this to her because she was a very powerful combat witch.

She could cause fatal damages to all the objects within ten steps by making them collapse inwards. According to Tilly, this kind of collapse won't be affected by any other factors, as no matter what kind of vessels Heidi used her power to affect, they would collapse. A wooden one would be crushed, while a metal one would be squashed.

And abdominal cavity and thoracic cavity of a living being would also collapse and squeeze the soft inner organs out, which reminded Roland of squeezing toothpaste out of a tube.

From Roland's perspective, Heidi should work in the factory instead of combating,

Since she could act as a punching machine to process the raw material with molds, which was the most basic use of her ability. Roland believed that her potential would be great if she realized that there was a space between moles and between atoms during her studies.

But unfortunately, he also knew that it was too late for her.

"Wake her up," Roland said.

Nightingale nodded and dashed into the jail to lift Heidi up and drag her over to the steel bars.

Roland looked down at her, saying, "I'm Roland Wimbledon, King of Graycastle. I've heard you wanted a private talk with me. You can talk to me now."

# Chapter 597: Blood and Fang

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It took Heidi quite a long time to figure out what had happened.

She first touched her thigh which had already been cured and then looked Nightingale up and down. After that, she finally turned her gaze to Roland and asked, "Your Majesty, did you cure me?"

"Yes, otherwise you'll make Nightfall exhausted," Roland replied. He then found a chair and seated himself in front of the jail, asking, "Tell me, where did you send the witches rejected by you?"

"That's... what Iffy told you?"

"Yes, the witch named Annie was her friend."

Instead of directly answering Roland's question, Heidi clenched her teeth. At the moment, Roland saw the hatred in her eyes.

"You could have given them a shelter. Archduke Island is the domain of Archduke Morgan and you're his successor. It's impossible that you can't even afford a dozen of assistant witches. Even though all you needed to do at the time was to offer them some gruel a day, you still chose to abandon them. You thought they were useless, but, in fact, assistant witches are far more powerful than you can imagine. The gun Andrea used to hurt you is a weapon made by assistant witches and ordinary people. It's very easy to operate. Even a farmer who's worked in the fields for all his life can easily use it to kill an experienced knight," Roland

said.

Hearing that, Heidi's face changed. She lifted up her head promptly, asking, "What did you say? Even ordinary people can use it?"

"Do you still believe I totally depend on the witches to capture the king's city and become King of Graycastle?" Roland leaned back in his chair and added, "If they had such a strong power, they wouldn't have been suppressed by the church and the secular lords."

"So... how did they make the weapon?"

Roland coldly stared at Heidi until she realized that she had asked an inappropriate question just now. After that, he mocked. "What? Do you think we're talking at a palace banquet?"

Heidi swallowed hard and said, "This lady beside you is..."

"Nightingale. She works for me, not for Tilly. I want to ask you again. Where did you send the witches rejected by you?" Roland said in a deep voice.

"I let them go to find the other witch organizations. I've no idea of where they went. Some of them might return to the nearby towns and cities, and some might go to the Kingdom of Dawn..."

"You're lying. None of this is true." Nightingale suddenly broke in

before she finished.

"No, Your Majesty. She knows nothing about me..."

"Save it, Heidi." Roland shook his head and continued, "Nightingale can tell truth from lies. You can't lie about anything in front of her. Now, you know why Tilly brought you from the Fjords to the Western Region. You'll be tried here and if you don't want to suffer, tell me what you did exactly. My patience is wearing thin."

In the dim firelight, the expression seemed uncertain on Heidi's face. Apparently, she did not expect that Nightingale had such an ability. After a moment of silence, Heidi grabbed the steel bars and shouted, "Your Majesty Wimbledon, the Kingdom of Wolfheart has been annexed by the church, the king has been lost and now I'm the only descendant of the Morgan royal family. If you help me regain my kingdom, I'll bring you countless profits! Gold royals, gems and... yes, witches! The Bloodfang Association will also be at your command!"

"Is this what you want to tell me at last?"

"I'll give you half of the Kingdom of Wolfheart! The land on the west of Blackstone Cliff will be yours!"

"Stop!" Roland interrupted impatiently. "I just want to know where the witches went!"

"What? My kingdom can't yet compare with those witches?" Heidi said in disbelief.

Roland was fed up with this and said, "Can't you understand me? The Kingdom of Wolfheart isn't yours and I've no interest in the land far away from me. Due to the basic manner of a noble, I'm here to ask you first, but I have many other methods to make you tell the truth. As for torture, I think you know more than me. It'll do you no good, so tell me what you did to those witches when I'm still here. Maybe, I'll spare your life."

Heidi took Roland's last sentence as a life-saving straw and confirmed. "Your Majesty... you'll really spare me?"

"I'm a man of actions."

Heidi lowered her head and said after a long hesitation, "I sent them to the nobles."

Roland's heart sank a little and then he asked, "Didn't you sell them to the nobles?"

"No, the whole thing is a trade-off." She took a deep breath and continued, "I could have never recruited enough witches for the Bloodfang Association if I had depended solely on the witches awakening on the Archduke Island. To attract more witches to come to me, I have to spread the name of the association throughout the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

"You could hire Rats to do the job for you. How come was this related to the nobles?" Roland asked. He had also tried to draw witches' attention via propaganda, but as Tilly started to spread the news earlier than him, he did not succeed in recruiting many witches.

"Rats themselves are manipulated by nobles. Besides, once the church had found out the secret of Archduke Island, I would have been in real trouble."

"So, you pay back with witches to the nobles?"

"Yes, I did this to ensure that the nobles and I were on the same boat. When they illegally kept witches, they would naturally notice the actions of the church and control the Rats properly. They would even deliberately divert the Holy City's attention from me. Only after making sure that the local lords were willing to accept witches, I would spread information in their domains. By doing so, I could minimize the risk," Heidi said in a low voice.

Roland did not have to ask to know what had happened next to those non-combat witches. They must have been locked in the dark rooms for the whole life, and most of them had died young when the magic power bit. Even for several lucky witches who made it to the adulthood, their fate had also been sealed. They must have been dead in the hands of the nobles who had used them just to sate their own lust or in the hands of the church who had forced the nobles to hand out the witches.

At the time, Heidi clearly sensed Nightingale's anger and impulsively moved backward, saying, "Your Majesty, you've



promised!"

Roland stopped Nightingale with his arm outstretched and continued to ask, "Who did those things for you? Iffy said that you've never met Annie."

"Skyflare... she was killed by Ashes."

"Anyone else? Did the other witches of the Bloodfang Association know nothing about this?" Roland asked.

Heidi nodded.

"Say it out!"

"... yes."

Roland secretly let out a sigh of relief and said, "The last question. What's the purpose of your Bloodfang Association to recruit combat witches everywhere?"

After a short silence, Heidi said, "I just wanted to help my father seize the throne which should belong to him."

Heidi stopped, but Roland could easily guess what she was to say. After the death of Archduke Morgan, the Bloodfang Association had become Heidi Morgan's tool to fulfill her own desire for power.

Walking out of the basement, Nightingale hold Roland's hand in a sudden, asking, "Are you really going to spare the life of that murder?"

"Heidi Morgan is a witch of Sleeping Island. It's not appropriate for me to execute her. Tilly wanted me to help in finding out the truth. That's why she took Heidi to the Western Region."

"You mean..." Nightingale's eyes started to shine.

"As for whether Sleeping Island will spare her or not, that's not what I can decide," Roland said, spreading his hands.

## Chapter 598: The End of Her Dream

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The following day, Roland told the news to Tilly and the other witches.

"How dare she use witches as a reward to those filthy nobles?" Failing to restrain her anger, Ashes broke off before Princess Tilly could speak. If Andrea had not stopped her, she probably had already rushed to the dungeon straightaway.

"Has Miss Nightingale checked the credibility of her testimony?" Tilly asked placidly.

"She spilled everything after a few preliminary questions," Roland said and told them what had happened in the cell in detail. "I thought it'd take a while for us to get her to surrender, but she's weaker than we expected." He had not expected to obtain a full confession from the prisoner yesterday, for the questioning was simply a sort of intimidation commonly practiced before the official interrogation. Because of this, he did not take the God's Locket of Retribution off Heidi, and Heidi did not know that Nightingale actually detected lies through magic power rather than voices either.

"I see." Tilly nodded. "Thank you for doing this for me."

"Don't be silly. I'm your brother." Roland immediately grabbed this opportunity, trying to sound somewhat intimate. "Plus, Heidi Morgan is also, so to speak, a witch on Sleeping Island. She should be handed over to you."

"Fair enough..." Tilly was silent for quite a while. "What would you do if this happened in the city of Neverwinter?"

Roland gazed at her gemlike eyes and noticed more silent rages than poignancies in her gray pupils.

She had already made her decision.

"I'll do the same thing." Roland comforted her.

At this remark, Heidi Morgan was sentenced to death.

Tilly no longer hesitated. She whispered something in Ashes' ear. The latter nodded and left the office.

"I'll now excuse myself, brother."

Roland could tell that Tilly was greatly depressed by the incident, but he did not know what to say in this scenario. When he was about to escort her to the Witch Building, an exhilarated scream pierced the silence. It was from the Listening Magic Stone in Nightingale's chest.

"It's Lightning, copy. It's Lightning. Summer has found out when the incident occurred."

The little girl's report stunned everybody.

"Um, what did she see?" Roland asked.

"Two monsters, big mouth, and tentacles. I don't know how to describe them." From her voice, Roland knew she was extremely hyper. "This is something we've never seen. Good Heavens... Your Majesty, you'd better come see it yourself!"

"What's it..." Tilly was bewildered.

"They're exploring the Devil's Town behind the snowcapped mountains. The Red Mist there completely disappeared a week ago," Roland explained, "and I wanted to tell you about it today, but..."

"I almost forgot about demons." Tilly took a deep breath. "You can fill me in with the details on the way."

"On the way?" Roland was slightly surprised.

"Can't I go with you?" She winked.

Princess Tilly had indeed been strong since her childhood. She knew how to adjust herself and manage to be impersonal when facing something of great importance. Roland was secretly amazed at how quickly she could restore the tranquility of her mind upon a crisis, an essential quality for a ruler, which he, unfortunately, still had a lot to work on.

If he took Tilly with him, Ashes and Andrea would certainly tag along. The trip would be, therefore, much safer. He had no reason to reject her.

"Yes, of course you can." Roland agreed with a nod.

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Heidi was leaning against the bars, waiting for Roland to get her out.

The Bloodfang Association was over. Tilly would definitely not allow her to return to Sleeping Island. However, as a member of the Morgan royal family, she had found a new path for her resurrection to the throne.

That was to rely on the imperial power of Graycastle and regain her throne.

Heidi had higher hopes for the reward she was going to propose than Roland's own promise. Roland did not directly make any promises probably just because he was Tilly's brother. He owed an explanation to Sleeping Island as to the whereabouts of these missing witches.

Heidi firmly believed that no noble could possibly resist such a great temptation. Half of the territory of Wolfheart would certainly bring Roland enormous fame and fortunes, and his name would also be passing down the history and become immortal.

As for herself? Her notoriety would be remembered by nobles in later generations. Nevertheless, she did not care about it. As long as she could successfully become the king of Wolfheart, she could abandon everything else.

Only in this way could she officially start her revenge.

She must avenge her father and herself on those nobles for their betrayal.

She swore she would hang those traitors one by one and hung their heads above the city gate, showing the public the fate of those who had framed Archduke Morgan.

The iron gate of the dungeon was suddenly flung open. Its squeaking sound appeared to be especially loud in the deadly silent dungeon.

Heidi immediately got to her feet and looked toward the end of the hallway by the bars.

The person who entered her sight, however, was not Roland Wimbleton, but sullen Ashes.

A chill went down her spine at that very moment.

"Wh-what're you doing here? Where's His Majesty?"

"You know exactly why I came here." Ashes slowly approached the cell. Heidi retreated as each step Ashes thrust forward, but she soon realized there was nowhere for her to take refuge. "You should have anticipated this when you handed those innocent witches to nobles."

"No!" Heidi shrieked. "His Majesty promised me he would let the matter go. He's already pardoned me. You can't disobey the king's order! Where's he? I request to see him!"

Ashes grabbed the iron bars and pulled them apart by force. She went into the cell while bending over. "Those witches came to the Bloodfang Association for your help, in hopes of having a good rest and being fed. Yet you failed them and sent them to hell with your own hands. The witches escaped the church's search but were betrayed by their own kind. Even if Roland has forgiven you, I can't just let it go like nothing has ever happened."

"Did Ashes... overhear the conversation between Roland and me? Or did Roland tell the secret to Tilly and the other witches?" Heidi thought. She snatched the God's Locket of Retribution on her neck in horror, but the locket was embedded in an iron ring. It was impossible for her to take it off barehanded.

"Let me help you." Ashes drew close to Heidi. She reached out her hand and lifted Heidi off the floor by her neck.

The iron ring started to tighten up and Heidi soon felt suffocated. She twisted and wriggled like a fish out of water, attempting to



gain a foothold on the floor but in vain. Gradually, as her vision blurred, Ashes' figure started to become distant.

Why did I end up like this?

I don't want to die here. I'm the only successor to the throne, the future king of Wolfheart.

The Throne of Tusk seemed to be drifting away from her. She could once again hear the mockeries of nobles ringing in her ears.

At a "crack" sound, the iron ring sank into her neck and stopped all her struggles.

# Chapter 599: A Retrospection of Magic Power

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By the afternoon, Roland was prepared to head to the snowcapped mountains.

The equipment he would take with him included a tent, adequate food, and a concrete paddle steamer. Since Devil's Town was coastal, he must set off from Shallow Beach. As usual, Hummingbird would be responsible for transportation.

He had to admit it was a pretty queer thing that Hummingbird, who was as petite as Nana, could hold up the entire concrete boat above her head. The scene reminded Roland of an ant moving rice ten times bigger than its own body. If Hummingbird happened to be on the other side of the boat, he would see a boat silently shifting by itself on the shore like a "ghost ship".

As long as Hummingbird kept her hands attached to the boat, she could help with the transportation continuously. It was a much more efficient way to move stuff compared with her earlier method, with which she had to spend a great deal of time reducing the weight of each item. The new method also saved Hummingbird a lot of magic power. The only drawback, however, was that she needed to follow enchanted goods, which meant she could only move two items at a time.

The paddle steamer heading to the west passed endless mountains and ridges. It arrived at Rocky Beach two days later.

Last time, Roland took a bird's-eye view of this land from a distance on the "Cloud Gazer". Now when he finally set foot on the beach, he found it was nothing but a vast and desolate wilderness.

Rocky Beach, merely ten miles apart from Shallow Beach, was a completely different world.

There were animal remains embedded in layers of gravel and crushed stones all over the place, some of which had corroded due to exposure, while others were in the process of turning into new rocks. A few bones, which Roland failed to determine their owners, were quite big, almost in the same size of an adult.

The steep precipice was also bizarre and mystic.

Numerous sharp stalagmites grew out of the rock surfaces. Unlike the ones suspending from the top of the cave, these stalagmites, which looked like countless hooks hanging upside down at first glance, were all sticking out horizontally with their tails pointing to the ceiling. They were totally unbounded by the gravitational pull. Roland did not see them clearly last time on the balloon; but now, as he was personally on the beach, he felt the hair on the back of his neck all stood up at the sight of this disturbing view.

No signs of life could be found on the long beach. No seagulls were nesting in the vicinity, and no seaweeds or clams were discovered either. Even at the rear of the rocks was an endless expanse of open country, as if demons' Red Mist had taken away all the lives on this land.

Roland and the others located the narrow crack leading to Devil's Town with the help of the marks left by Lotus. It was actually more of a fracture than a crack. As the gap, fathomless and confined, almost split the whole precipice in half. Lotus created a narrow path of one and a half meters wide at the opening.

When they stepped down the stairs and passed through the crevice, Nightingale involuntarily burst out an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Roland asked.

"Look over there." She pointed to the bottomless crack. "There's a hole in the rocks."

They all stopped and took a peek. Close to the inky bottom, Roland spotted several round holes, which seemed to be manually drilled. "What's that?"

"I don't know. But I've seen similar holes in the Impassable Mountain Range, except the ones there are slightly bigger." Nightingale hesitated for a moment and then said, "I feel something is looking at me deep down there. The deeper I probe, the stronger this feeling is."

"...Something?" Roland was a bit surprised.

"There is more than one." Nightingale nodded. "In the valley on the way to the camps of the Witch Cooperation Association, there's

a path leading to the bottom of the ground. I've never been down there."

"Take Sylvie to the Impassable Mountain Range after she's back." Roland took another look at the bottom of the fracture, managing to suppress the desire to explore. He then ordered the team to continue to marshal forward.

Although this continent was a part of Land of Dawn, on which human beings had settled as early as 1,000 years ago, they had a very minimal understanding of the world, as if mankind had deliberately forgotten to explore the outside world. Roland once told Agatha about drawing a map of the whole continent but was informed that the Union had done so for Fertile Plains. They had very roughly sketched out an outline of Land of Dawn. As to the land beyond, they knew nothing about it.

That was why Roland fully supported Thunder to explore lands overseas. He had thought it would be a matter of time to understand the whole world, but now he realized he was ignorant of even his own territory, the Kingdom of Graycastle in the Western Region.

Unfortunately, he had to leave these thoughts behind for the time being, as the war against the church was pressing.

They soon found themselves in an open field after passing through the crack. The First Army who garrisoned there led them to their camps at once. Roland then saw Agatha and Soraya.

"Where are Lightning and the others?"

"She's flying around with Summer." Agatha sighed. "She's too perky to be quiet just for a second. Devil's Town has almost turned into her playland."

"It really would be a national park that you need to buy tickets to enter in the modern world," Roland exclaimed.

"What did you say?"

"No... nothing." Roland coughed to conceal his embarrassment. "I'll use the Sigil of Listening to ask her to come back. Now take me where the collapsed stone tower is."

When the group of people reached the center of the relics, Lightning, Maggie and Summer arrived just in time.

"Lightning is landing!"

The blonde little girl slowly came down to the ground while stretching out her arms to the sides. She turned around and gave Roland a big hug.

Roland did not know whether to laugh or to cry since Lightning had reached puberty.

"Aw...!" Next Maggie joined, who stretched out her wings in the

same way. She fell straight to the ground, almost shaking Summer off her back.

Roland understood that Lightning was one of the youngest witches in the Witch Union. So, it kind of explained why she was always so airy and jaunty. Maggie, however, was an adult witch. It did not make sense that she still acted like a child. There was only one plausible explanation: Lightning's fluttering manner was somewhat contagious.

"Since everybody's here, let's get started." Roland eyed Summer, whose legs were still trembling.

"Yes... Your Majesty." Summer stumbled to the hole and closed her eyes.

In a second, the large hole in the ground was replaced by a giant black stone tower. Meanwhile, the air was permeated with red mists as thick as blood.

Roland stepped back involuntarily while at the same time holding his breath.

"This was what it looked like here 26 days ago, right before the incident," Agatha explained, "If Summer traces back the time only once, she can maintain the illusion for nearly an hour. It thus allows us to see what exactly happened from the beginning to the end."

"Where's that Eye Demon that you talked about? The one with eyeballs all over that will attract the demons' attention once it sees you?" Tilly asked curiously.

"At the top of this stone tower." Agatha pointed to the high sky above. "The stone tower is too high for Summer to reach. We can't see it now."

Roland looked up and found the space above the tower was blank, as if it had been chopped off. It appeared that Summer could only reconstruct the area within a radius of five meters.

Just then, the ground started to shake.

"It's coming!" Agatha shouted in a low voice.



# Chapter 600: A Shocking Event

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"Coming? What's coming?"

Before Roland had time to inquire about the details, the ground beneath had risen and cracked. The black stone tower was lifted into the air in a second. A giant gray monster jumped out of the crack and opened its huge crimson mouth, trying to devour the stone tower. The slimes on its skin spilled all over the place.

As Summer could only reconstruct the scene but not sounds, Roland felt like he was watching a vivid but intense silent movie. The witches, who had never been to a theatre, reacted more dramatically. They all cried out in fright and stepped back a few paces. Ashes even automatically pulled out her sword and stood in front of Tilly, in an attempt to protect her.

What was more horrid, however, was that there was more than one monster.

Underneath the black stone tower hid a Tentacle Monster, whose gleamy black body was almost completely fused with the stone tower, with only its tentacles poking out of the bottom of the tower like innumerable feet. Its scale, which glistened in a deep red light, was the only indication that the creature was alive.

Tentacle Monster was pretty much as big as half of the castle, but it was incomparable to Megamouth Beast who could engulf the entire tower. To avoid being swallowed, it strove to keep the megamouth beast from shutting the mouth by waving its tentacles.

Meanwhile, clouds of blood mists that burst out of the scale started to gradually erode the skins of the beast. Evidently, the thick mist, almost of a black color, could cause harm to its rival.

Nevertheless, the megamouth beast was simply too large to defeat only via the red mist corrosion. As the stone tower was lifted off the ground little by little, the tentacle monster was finally crushed by the tower and became the megamouth beast's food. After that, the black stone tower slowly slid into the giant mouth as well. In the end, Roland saw the eye demon, which appeared to take no notice of the megamouth beast and sat motionless at the top of the tower during the whole process of being gulped down without the slightest intention to escape.

The illusion stopped at that moment. The red mists and the giant monsters vanished instantly. Peace was restored. They saw a massive hole in the ground and realized what they had seen did occur at some point in the past.

Roland heaved a long sigh. He was further convinced that he had done the right thing not to include the soldiers from the First Army. His heart was beating so fast as if it were going to jump out of his chest while he was watching. Even if the "movie" was now over, the fear still lingered.

"This is... the wriggling monster that ate Miss Agatha's lab?" After a long silence, Tilly broke off. "Why would it attack the Devil's Town?"

"We might be wrong earlier. It's probably not a demonic hybrid enslaved by demons. At least, it isn't controlled by the demons

behind the snowcapped mountains..." Roland looked at Agatha and said, "What do you think?"

"I agree." Agatha nodded, apparently having been thinking about it for a long time. "There were no records of this kind of demonic beast whatsoever during the two Battles of Divine Will. If demons do have the ability to subjugate them, we won't be able to hold up long, and Taquila would have been devastated long before. Demons just need to order a few megamouth beasts to carry some senior demons and enter the city from the underground when launching an attack."

"If not demons, then who does?" Tilly's brows furrowed. "Judging from the transparent mantis that Miss Nightingale found, it's obvious that these demonic beasts have some sort of plans."

"Can't it be a random action?" Nightingale spread out her hands. "Hybrids are by no means ordinary demonic beasts. Based on their performances during the Months of Demons, they have already developed critical thinking skills. Perhaps they'll be even smarter than us if they live long enough."

Everybody laughed at her comment and felt less strained at once. Clearly, nobody would believe that those savage monsters, which knew nothing but wrestling in muds, would be more intelligent than fed and clothed human beings. The idea just sounded too ridiculous.

Only Roland remained silent. He gazed at the deep hole, dealing with crowding thoughts in his mind.

Was Mankind the most intelligent species?

He would not be so presumptuous as to boldly assume mankind was the smartest creature, especially when he was currently in a completely foreign world. When the living environment and the requirement for necessities changed, what was considered to be intelligent might be distinctive as well. Take demonic beasts for example. They would certainly not regard silk and bread as essential.

"Why was the eye demon unresponsive?" Andrea asked in confusion. "Didn't you say the whole campground will be startled once it sees you?"

"Because nobody saw it," Agatha explained, "Eye demons will see us only after we see them. But to that megamouth beast, it simply had no eyes. It has nothing but a big mouth."

"Because it doesn't need an eye." Roland continued, "Like an earthworm, the beast lives underground all the year round. It doesn't need an eye to see things. Naturally, it won't specially grow any light-sensitive organs."

"Grow... what?" Tilly questioned curiously.

"Light-sensitive organs, such as eyes. Some animals use skins to detect light." Roland did not go further but squatted down and pointed to the deep hole. "Lightning, do you want to go down there to take a peek?"

The little girl nodded immediately.

"That's too dangerous." Ashes attempted to stop her. "We don't know what's hiding down there at all."

"You don't need to probe into the tunnel, but just look at where the beast is heading," Roland said, "and Nightingale will stay here while monitoring magic reactions. It's going to be fine."

"Um, don't I need to follow it into the hole and catch it?" Lightning pouted.

"Not this time. He devoured demons after all, not Agatha." Roland stressed once again. "Get out of there and report to me right after you find where the tunnel leads. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Lightning took out a portable torch from her knapsack and plunged into the deep hole after lighting the torch.

"The exit is over here!" After a few minutes, Lightning's voice came out of the magic stone. "Do you see the torchlight?"

Nightingale soon found out the direction in which the tunnel ran based on the location of the torch. "It's good now. You can come up."

Roland's brows deepened when he glanced at Nightingale who

was standing to the southeast of the hole, and the lofty snowcapped mountains behind her.

Apparently, someone shared the same view.

"It looks like we were indeed wrong." Tilly shrugged. "The wriggling demonic beast we met in the Misty Forest did not intend to go to the Devil's Town, but maybe to this snowcapped mountain?"

"It seems so." Roland looked up. The summit of the mountain loomed against puffs of clouds. The snow on its peak shimmered in the rays of sunlight. "It appears that we have to thoroughly look into this highest mountain in the Western Region."

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